Mikey lit a cigarette and sat down on the tracks. The beer in his hand was half empty and warm, and his lips were covered in burns. The light of the city failed to crawl to the tracks, and the air was still.

The train blared its horn and slowed as it crossed the road, and as it passed it regained speed. The conductor was going steady down the dark line, he sat back a bit in his chair, and prepared himself for the next crossing.

Mikey smoked his cigarette and lied down on the tracks. His legs were sticking out of his shorts and resting on the metal, which vibrated not terribly unlike a massage chair. Mikey drank his beer and got out his phone. He texted Kenny Larson from fifth period English and told him he was suicidal. Kenny was already asleep.

Mikey saw the train coming from the light and the whistle, and he stood up and got himself ready. He was gonna prove that he was a man. He was gonna have no fear. He was gonna stand in front of the train. He hopped from one rail to the other, jumping like a little kid walking home, moving toward the train.

Mikey slipped and landed sideways, off to his left, and when the train came, it only took his leg.

Mikey screamed from the pain, and the train slowed down. When it came to a stop, the conductor came out with a couple of other people and they all rushed around him with flashlights. He blacked out after hearing one of them yell, “Jesus fuck his leg is clean off!”

Mikey woke up in the hospital alone in the night. It was dark and there was a bed on either side of him. His leg hurt bad, he’d fallen out of bed. The heart rate monitor was screaming for help, and after a couple of seconds he heard the footsteps of the nurse running down the hallway. He came in and turned on the light, and helped Mikey back into bed. Mikey looked at his leg and wondered how it still hurt. He could feel the part that was missing. He could feel it, and he let

the nurse know he could. He said, “please, just put me out of my misery. I can still feel it. It’s gone but I can feel it. It hurts. Please. I don’t want to live.”

The nurse laid him down on the bed and Mikey was taken back to when the train hit him. He saw the lights of the train passing, and the white that covered his vision when the train ran him over. Mikey, who was once on the football team, who was once the pride of the town. Who tore a ligament in his leg and could never play again. Who never really made it out of high school. Mikey, the loser who danced with a train.

Something about being in Lockhart always made Neziz and Jenine feel uneasy. The town was too old, full of people that would call the cops if you lit a joint. They didn’t sell bottled sodas at any of the restaurants either, and everything had to have meat in it. That last part was really only a thing for Jenine, she was the one who cared about glass bottles, and she hadn’t eaten meat since senior year. It was hot that day in April, when they were set to find a party at an old lakehouse. They had driven nearly 4 hours by then and they were gonna be there before nightfall, however, so that meant it was time for gas and red bull. The station was in an ugly part of town, where concrete was the only thing you could really see, greenery off in the distance.

They sat with the A/C blaring and the truck’s windows all rolled up, they had a slight tint to them but it wasn’t enough. Neziz got out the sun visor to block out more of the heat, and that seemed to help. Jenine was feeling pretty tired and cold since she hadn’t been smoking, so she cracked a window a little bit and lit a cigarette, sharing it with her sister.

Neziz said, “did you hear that shit Mikey pulled out on the rails?”

“I did,” Jenine replied, “I heard from Sharon. Apparently he texted Kenny Larson about it before he did it.”

“Kenny Larson?” Neziz asked, perplexed, “You mean Kenny Larson, the NFL player? The one who got on the Cowboys? Football star Kenny Larson?”

“Yeah, he texted some people about it, ended up in some tabloids. Sharon told me about it”

“Goddamn,” Neziz exclaimed.

“Yeah and Sharon is usually a lot more grounded than Sharice so it’s not like she was making it up. I saw the paper.”

“No I ain’t sayin’ you’re lying. I believe it. Mikey went off the rails after Junior year. Sorry. I didn’t mean to make a joke there. I just mean, like, he stopped being himself after he got fell at that game.”

“Yeah, no, I know what you mean,” Jenine replied, “you know something? I think his game was actually near here. Like wasn’t it in Lockhart? Or am I high? I mean I’m high, but…”

“Yeah, no, he was in Waco, remember. We kept making jokes about the Branch Davidians and we thought that was why he got hurt.”

“Oh yeah,” Jenine said, “didn’t we try peyote too?”

“Yeah, we did. Come to think of it, that was probably the cause of his injury.”

“Do you think we should visit him, see how he’s doing?”

“Sure,” Neziz replied.

It was a little later into the night when the party was set to start, around 10. It was this abandoned house with a big lake in the back. People fished there all the time, the land was essentially under public ownership. Any attempt to sell the land was met with local resistance, which would inevitably lead to the new occupants leaving quickly. Teenagers can be really nasty in the sticks, and people tend to grow attached somewhat to the land they frequent. This place was a 3 minute gravel driveway off the highway, a few lights and a sign sat there on the corner to let you know there was something there.

Jenine stepped out of the truck and her sister met her side before they entered the property. Neziz said, “I remember the last time we were here. It was out first road trip, remember?”

“No,” Jenine replied, “that was El Paso. How do you confuse little Lockhart with big El Paso, Neziz?”

“Oh,” Neziz continued, “I don’t know, my memory ain’t like it was in high school you know.”

They moved toward a light by the lake. There were maybe 10 or 20 people there, most of the jocks from the local highschool, they were throwing around a football and smoking Marlboro reds. They wouldn’t dare put another brand to their lips, they were still chasing the masculinity that their parents told them about, and a lot of them became fascinated with the Marlboro cowboy from the old commercials. They were drinking Jack, there was a van with some people in it, sitting under one of those streetlights with a slouch and playing music.

Neziz took the lead and walked up to the van, her hair flowing in the wind and her converse occasionally failing to find footing amongst the mud, and her arms dangled lazily to her sides. Jenine was barely trudging along behind her, tired from the heat.

The jocks were caught up in some sort of pissing contest on how hard one could make a football fly, so they walked right past their little game of football. A close look at one of them revealed to Jenine that they were likely on meth. She recalled the first and only time she smoked meth, but the memory was a haze that was easy for her to break through as she stepped up into the van.

It didn’t have any seats in the back and the floor was covered with a multicolored, circular rug, and there were 4 people already in it. When Neziz and Jenine found their seats next to Clarice, the van became full.

Jenine met Clarice when she went on a field trip in 6th grade. Clarice was from San Antonio, and her hair had white streaks running through it. Jenine complimented her and that

was it. They never stopped talking, but they hung out a lot less than they used to. Clarice invited them to this party.

Someone had brought a bong, which is really just customary, and you could smoke out of it, but that wasn't what everyone wanted to do. They wanted to snort fuckin oxycontin. Some kind of fervor gripped them in their pursuit of the drug, full bottles of pills would be stolen or bought or scammed from local towns and freaks. Jenine was here for it. In the middle of the circle was a small mirror used to sort lines, and there were plastic bags with pills to be crushed waiting for the hammer.

It was a neat little setup.

Neziz had a cigarette between her lips, a short one that popped a menthol pod in the filter. As she smoked, she drew the attention of the other people in the van, who began to want their own cigarettes. A pack was taken out of a pocket and tossed lazily into the center, luckily not hitting the mirror, as it was being held by Jenine.

Clarice took one out of the pack and lit it. "How was the drive," she asked.

"Hot," Jenine replied.

Joyce was feeling paranoid in her room, which was on the second story. Her walls were coated with the hottest of pinks and covered in various art pieces which spelled out the way that she felt throughout the years. Mostly paintings of flowers and landscapes, she appreciated the complexity of flowers. As she looked down she saw the work put before her. A study sheet, for her precalculus final, which was to take place in a couple of days, and beside it, her Adderall. She opened the box of pills and inside there were none. She closed it again.

She checked the locks on her door and her windows and made sure there was no chance that her isolation could be broken, and then she checked the box again. Still nothing. She got out her phone and began looking at Snapchat, which was her preferred method of getting more pills. She hadn't had one all day and it was getting a little hard for her to focus. She texted her dealer,

Rufio, and waited for a response. While she was waiting she checked the pill box again. Still nothing.

Rufio responded complaining about the late hour that she was asking him to deliver. He said he would do it, but only if he got a $10 delivery fee in return. Joyce agreed and Rufio was on his way.

Outside Joyce's window was a slanted roof which gave way to a sort of pathway that could be taken to the ground. It was a dangerous way to have the house set up when they were kids, but it was very convenient now that she used it to sneak out. She saw Rufio's car at the gate and unlocked the window. She grabbed $110 and put it in her back pocket, and opened up her window, climbing out and making her way to the ground, where she would begin to run toward Rufio and open the gate. She got in the passenger seat of his car and held the money in her hand. The deal was made and she went back to her room.

She dumped the bag of pills into her box, took out three, and began crushing them. She didn't bother to look at the dosage of the pills before beginning her routine. She crushed them up in a dime bag that she'd been using and reusing for 2 years now, which was coated all throughout the inside with a fine particulate that couldn't be retrieved except with water. She dumped the powder out onto a hand mirror and snorted it using a piece of a plastic straw.

She began to study with her newfound energy. She was starting to get better at making her graphs, which was good because that's kind of what calculus is all about. She was finished with the tenth problem when she decided that she'd reward herself with more Adderall.

Sharon and Sharice didn't spend much time upstairs. They stuck around in the smoking room. There was a carpet couch and a white rug stained gray on the floor. Sharon was taking a hit of the joint they were sharing, which was rolled with delta 8 flower they got from a local no-card smoke shop. Sharon began to remark "I don't know how I lived before I got high."

"Yeah," Sharice replied, "I feel you."

Sharon passed the joint to her sister, “It really just makes everything make that much more sense. I feel like my brain is a disease and weed is the medicine.”

“Yeah,” Sharice replied, “I feel you.”

“I feel like no one else understands me, you know, like that I need this shit to make my brain function,” Sharon continued.

“Yeah,” Sharice replied, “I feel you.”

“You’re really easy to talk to,” Sharon said.

“Yeah,” Sharice replied, flashing a grin. Her eyes blinked in cold slits.

Sharon got the joint back from her sister and began to smoke it again. “I wonder how Neziz is doing. Do you think she’s gonna move out soon? I feel like she’s only staying nowadays because she doesn’t want me to get her room. Like, I know she knows I want her room, it’s obvious that I want her room, I’ve wanted her room since I was like 10 or something. But she’s just such a bitch that she wants to keep it from me. And she’s always going on about work and shit. Like, I get it, you don’t want to work, but maybe like, you have to? Like maybe it’s a thing you just gotta fucking do. But that’s just an excuse. Really she just wants that fucking room and she doesn’t wanna give it to me because she’s had it out for my whole life. God, I swear I could just fucking kill her sometimes. But I know how that would hurt Jenine. And mom probably. Even though mom probably hates her more than I do by this point.”

“Yeah,” Sharice replied, “she’s a real bitch sometimes.” Sharice felt that feeling in her chest again.

Sharon passed the joint back to her sister and the two of them sat back in the couch. The walls were painted orange and there was a slow haze which encapsulated the room. It moved only to accept more of itself, a self-replicating organism.

There was a small window at the top of the north wall in the smoking room and although it was covered in fogged glass, Sharon was just barely able to see flashing blue and red lights.

“Shit,” Sharon said,” we gotta smell proof quick. Hide this shit. The fucking cops are here.”

Sharon and Sharice scrambled to hide the shit they had in their room, and they heard the rush of footsteps upstairs.

Neziz and Jenine had picked up Mikey on their way home from the party. He was in the back seat, staring at his missing leg, which his mother said was the only thing he did anymore. “It hurts a lot,” he said, “even though it’s not there anymore I can still feel it. I can feel the tissue dying even though it’s in the hospital in the medical waste bin.”

“That sounds terrifying,” replied Neziz. Jenine said nothing because she was passed out in the back seat. Mikey and Neziz were trying to stay awake on the road, hoping they could get back before 4 a.m, even though Grapevine was still a good 3 hours away. Neziz’s eyes had a thin ceramic glaze covering them.

“What have you heard about it, Neziz?” Mikey asked.

“Well, I mean I’ve heard some stuff. Do you really wanna talk about it?”

“No one will talk to me about it. They all just want me to forget about it. As if I could.”

“I’ve heard one thing. Did you text Kenny Larson that you were going to kill yourself before you did it?”

Mikey stared at the passing headlights. He remembered when he used to live with his mom full time, back when he was a teenager, and driving this stretch just to hang out with Neziz and Jenine. “Yeah,” he said, “when I started to feel the tracks vibrate I texted him. You know, he ruined my life.”

“Did he?” Neziz replied, getting into the same old argument she has a hundred times, “I mean, it was really that injury wasn’t it?”

“He caused that injury. Before the game he wore down the cleats with sandpaper so I would slip easier. That fucking game. Did you hear that I caught him with my gear before the

game? He wanted my spot on the team and the coach wouldn't let him because he knew I was better than that fucking flatfoot Kenny Larson." Mikey's chest heaved.

Neziz didn't reply to this and changed the subject, "So what have you been doing since you got out of surgery?"

Mikey sat and looked at the street signs passing. He thought for a second about whether or not he should keep talking or if he even wanted to be in the car anymore. Eventually he replied, "I guess not much. I've got a wheelchair now. I mostly just sit in the wheelchair and smoke a lot of cigarettes. I'm under like suicide watch at my house. My mom hid all the knives and my dad came and picked up all his old guns and ammo so I can't use them anymore. To be honest there's not much to do there. I get drunk. I do that a lot. But I did that a lot before too."

"I'm sorry so much shit is going on," Neziz said to him. She couldn't understand the last few things he said, she was dozing to a Shitkid track.

"It's not your fault. I guess maybe I shouldn't talk about it so much. Maybe I should try and just forget about it. Try and move on."

"Maybe. Does talking about it make you feel better?"

"No."

Eugene had driven 20 minutes at 3 a.m to reach his ex-wife's house because of an emergency. One of his children, Joyce, had overdosed on Adderall and she was being revived by paramedics. He wanted to be there. There was a good chance she wouldn't come back. He wanted to be there when she died. After his youngest, Sharice, was born, the freshness of his marriage had run its course, and he was finding himself caring far more about the money in his business than about his family life. When Sharice was 1, and a bit easier to take care of, (and after he stuck it in his favorite barista) he skipped. But that was a long time ago. He's not the same man he was in his 40s. He didn't want to make endless money pulling oil out of the Permian Basin, he wanted his family back. But they didn't want him back. The only reason they even called to tell him what

was going on was so he could see his daughter one more time before she died, they wanted to make sure that he was there for that at least.

They had Joyce out on a stretcher when he pulled up, they were running her to an ambulance. They had to stop for a moment, however, as Joyce had begun seizing and vomiting, a violent combination. The paramedics allowed her to finish seizing as one held an AED in case she went under. Once the seizing was done, they flipped her on her side and drained the vomit from her mouth, trying to clear the airway and allow her to breath. While they did this, they checked her pulse, somewhat relieved to find it. She was not breathing however, and was choking on her vomit. The paramedics continued to care for her and clear her airway, but in the meantime Joyce's mother, Ariel, was sobbing uncontrollably on the curb, being comforted by the rest of her daughters, who were all leaned over her and trying to make her feel better.

That was the moment he arrived, pulling up alongside the curve of the cul de sac, a large square in a circle hole. He stepped out of the car, a stranger to his daughters, his head having balded and his beard grown out long. He wore tall boots and a 40 gallon hat, and behaved as if he were a cowboy rather than an oil baron. He placed his hat over his chest and approached his family.

Ariel saw her ex-husband standing over her, and looked up at him. She felt an intense rush of shame. She said, "yeah, I guess things have been hard since you left, Eugene. The kids are all addicts now. I just didn't think it would be Joyce that I lost first." She began sobbing again, as her children rubbed her shoulders. "You can talk to the paramedics if you want to see her. She hasn't seen you since she was a baby girl. It might make her stronger to see you. She's not conscious anymore but maybe it'll help." Her voice broke.

Sharon and Sharice came up to their father's side. They just looked up at him in amazement. Like Santa Claus.

Eugene didn't say anything. He didn't know what to say. He just looked at her, broken on the curb like a thrown-out piece of furniture. When he came to his senses, he walked up to one

of the paramedics and asked to ride with them to the hospital. Since it was just him and not the 5 other family members that lived with her, they let him on, and took off.

Mikey got a facial scar when he was 12 from bashing his face onto a metal pew at an outdoor chapel in New Mexico. He was on vacation with his family at the time, and there was a potluck taking place that his family was invited to by his uncle's church in Albuquerque. He was rushed to hospital and received 12 stitches, and a new scar over his left eyebrow. It wouldn't have been as noticeable if he hadn't picked at it so much during healing.

He started playing football in elementary school, as a way to blow off extra energy. He didn't really like it until 7th grade, since his dad started giving him extra attention if he did well in games. He had a new motivation.

After his injury, he would no longer play. His father was sticking out his broken marriage so he could get some money when Mikey went pro, which every coach said was extremely likely. When that was gone, he left. Mikey and his mother were orphaned, with no income and no quality of life. That's around when he got into drugs, mostly drinking and weed but also cocaine at parties, which he would frequent. Neziz and Jenice were there at most of them too, although they were getting into harder drugs than he would touch. At one party he remembered Jenice trying ice.

But he wasn't in high school anymore. He never went to college and just acted like he was going to school. He'd hang out with the jocks of whatever class was the seniors at the time, and buy them beer, but when he turned 25 it just got creepy. People would turn him away, who in their right mind is 26 hanging out with 17 year olds? So he was alone, then more than ever, and this is what drove him to suicide.

Now, looking at himself in the mirror and reflecting on his past, Mikey desired nothing more than an end to his pain. But he knew he didn't want to hurt his mother again, or his friends, so he tried to be strong. He wheeled himself out of the bathroom and met with his

friends and their family in the hospital waiting room. The hospital required masks to be worn inside, a rule which was once again repeated to Mikey by the receptionist, forcing him to reluctantly wrap the mask around his ears.

He sat next to Jenine and Neziz, who were both so tired that they couldn't keep their eyes open. Still they tried to stay awake, not wanting to miss the news about their sister. They made sure to sit at the end of the row to allow his chair to sit alongside them. He sipped a cup of water that he had left on the floor, leaned back, and sank in for the long haul.

Jenine and Neziz were back at home. Joyce had gone comatose, and although her brain activity was still there, it was not looking too good for her in the long run. It would cost a lot of money to keep her alive in this state, and Ariel didn't know how much she could afford, but for now they kept the machines on. As the week dragged on, Sharon and Sharice would smoke almost constantly. There were news stories about Joyce all the way out in Austin, about how she was an honor student and how she's probably relied on snorting adderall for god knows how long and about her parent's divorce and pressures at school. Joyce was a little microcelebrity. Neziz started drinking boxes of wine with Ariel in the kitchen most every day. Mikey would spend a lot of time with Sharon and Sharice, smoking and talking to them about what their lives at school were like, how the school had changed. They'd smoke themselves braindead and talk about it for hours.

But during one of these conversations about school, the topic of a party came up. It was to be held in Dallas, at a concert, in the parking lot after the show. The sisters and Mikey were quick to brush it off, but Ariel heard that it would be Santana playing live, and she insisted on the subject, talking to Neziz about it.

"It would be a good opportunity for us to do something fun. And besides I love Santana. We could all go together and just have a little escape from the gloom." She said this with that

twang like she was imitating a matronly figure from Little House on the Prairie or The Beverly Hillbillies, her “sitcom mom” voice.

Neziz said she thought it was a good idea too, and told Jenine, who said she would go, and by the time they had returned to Sharon, Sharice and Mikey, the three were discussing whether or not Scott Bingley was hot. Mikey had come up with a laid back demeanor in his chair.

Mikey was hanging out with Joyce in the hospital. She was still unresponsive, but the doctors were allowing visitors. He sat next to the bed and watched the TV, a small pitiful one that was mounted to the top of the wall. He thought about the concert that he was missing, but imagined the sound of Santana's music and decided that he'd made the right decision. His leg was still healing over and it was tender, so he started to scratch and pick at it while he watched the TV. There was some kind of news story on screen, something about suspicions of a new serial killer who the police weren't giving any information about. He wasn't really paying attention, but the next story interested him. It was about Joyce, and the so called "Adderall epidemic" which the reporter spoke about. He said that Joyce was one of millions of people under the age of 18 to get an Adderall addiction, and one of the unlucky few who overdosed. He said that because it was being sold as a pill, people were taking it without considering how dangerous it could be, the same way they take aspirin or tylenol.

Mikey watched as they aired an interview of a nurse from the hospital, who Mikey saw when he’d come in, saying, "situations like this are gumming up the hospital and preventing us from being able to treat more serious conditions, or give long term care. This girl takes up a bed either until she wakes up or her mother says to pull the plug, and either way this could be a matter of months or even years."

That nurse came in and changed Joyce’s catheter. She glanced at Mikey for a second but looked away quickly. Mikey was sure it was because he stunk, which he knew but felt incapable

of fixing. He stunk of sweat and alcohol and cigarettes and pot and there was no way of changing it because he hated the idea of taking care of himself. The

Joyce was alone in the middle of the night. She was dreaming about something nasty. It was something she'd never dreamed before. She saw herself in a hallway, with seemingly infinite space going either way, and she was running. Just running, something she hadn't done since she was a freshman. She was just running, straight, with no distraction. It was dark and scary, but that didn't effect her. She could tell, although she could only see herself from behind, that she wasn't running from anything, no monster or existential threat. She was just running. She was running faster and longer than she ever had before. She was running like she only had one day to do it, and she wanted to see how far she could make it. She ran and ran down the hallway and the entire time she was happy. But then she arrived. A door was before her, it was wide open and there was light coming from the inside, a lamp near the doorway and another sat atop a desk near the back of the room were the only lights on in the room. At the desk, she could see someone sitting, studying a book closely, with glasses and a long cigarette sticking out of his mouth. She had never smoked before, but in her dreams cigarettes were a constant. She wondered what they tasted like. She started to walk forward, into the room, and she did so successfully, but once she was about halfways across the room, she was moved back to the beginning, forced to restart. She did, and over and over again she tried to ask the man at the desk for the cigarette, until eventually, she made a mistake. She stepped on a shovel, which made a loud noise, and the man at the desk was startled. He turned around in his chair.

"What are you doing here?" he asked Joyce.

"I'm just walking, I'm just looking around. Might I have a cigarette?" she asked.

"I don't know, I don't know if I can trust you." The man replied.

"Why don't you trust me to have a cigarette?"

"Well how am I supposed to know that you're not some kind of vampire?"

"I don't know.'

"Well, why don't you come toward me?"

Joyce stepped forward, and once again was moved back to the doorway.

"Aha! I knew it. You're not real! You're not a person!"

"What? No, I'm real, I'm here."

"You're dead! I knew it you're not a person! You're a filthy blood sucking parasite! You would've killed me if I gave you a cigarette wouldn't you have?"

"I would never kill someone!" Joyce replied.

"You're just a waste of fucking space, you fucking vampire asshole. Begone from me. Go fuck yourself."

Joyce sat down in the doorway. There was nothing left to do then but to sit.

Neziz and Jenine were getting blasted on vodka lemonades at the Santana concert. Their mom got a really nice seat near the front and the rest of them got a bunch of general admission tickets and stood somewhere near the back. The concert was playing loudly at an ampatheatre outside

Grapevine, and there were a hell of a lot more people there than any of them were expecting.

Jenine was on her 6th drink, and Neziz probably closer to her 8th. Sharon and Sharice were stealing sips from their sisters. It was a pretty good time overall, especially when someone pulled out a little baby bag of pills.

"There's something about doing shit in public that just makes it so much more fun than in private," Neziz said.

"I get you," Jenine said, crushing one of the pills in a plastic bag in between two rocks. "The best shit is like this, when there's no cops who want to fuck with you."

"Yeah," said Sharice.

Santana started playing his guitar in a different way than he'd been before. The intro segment was over.

"I don't get why the band is called Santana if he's just the Guitar player," Sharon said to no one in particular.

"You don't get a lot of things, more than just that. Be honest, what else do you not understand about this?" said Jenine.

"Shut the fuck up Jenine," said Neziz, "quit being such a fucking dick to your little sister."

"I'm just saying man. Who says the band needs to be named after the fuckin singer? Who the fuck cares if he's the guitarist. The music is good, that's the fuckin point."

Sharon felt pretty bad about all the shit her sister said about her and everything. She kept her mouth shut from then on.

"I don't get it either though," said Sharice.

"Oh my fucking god," Jenine started to say.

Neziz put her hand over her sister's face and pushed her back. "I said shut up, Jenine."

Jenine shut up but started to shun Sharon and Sharice.

It was around 1 or 2 a.m when Joyce finally woke up, wrapped in a blanket in the hospital, the lights off and Mikey sitting in his wheelchair. She was pretty scared, but she hit a button and called for a nurse. She wasn't sure what happened or why. She knew something bad must've happened though. She couldn't remember anything that she had dreamed, but she had a strange feeling about her, like she was worried about the fact that she was there, like she was supposed to stay out of the hospital. She felt like a waste of space.

Joyce was greeted by the nurse with a blinding light, as the light in the room was quite bright, and the exclamation she gave was enough to wake up Mikey, who was similarly blinded. The nurse said to Joyce, "You're awake! And so quickly!"

"Quickly? How long was I asleep?" Joyce asked.

"Holy shit, Joyce you're awake," said Mikey, "That's awesome, I gotta text Neziz about this."

"It was maybe 2, 3 weeks."

"3 weeks?" asked Joyce.

"Yeah, maybe? I don't know I was only assigned to you a couple days ago. You've been here a little bit."

"That's fucking wild, you don't remember it?" asked Mikey.

"No I don't. What happened?"

"Hold on let me get the doctor," the nurse said, leaving the room.

Mikey wheeled himself closer to Joyce, who was slowly and weakly pushing herself up to sit against the headboard of the hospital bed.

"You OD'd," Mikey told her, "like, you were snorting fucking Adderall pills and you fucking OD'd. Your mom found you, I think. She was like, really broken up about it. Also, dude, you were on the news. Like a story about overdoses, they put you on the fucking news. It was kinda cool, but they were pretty much just an asshole to you the whole time."

"Really? A news story about someone in a fucking coma? That's not cool man. I didn't fucking consent to that shit."

"Well they fucking did it, and it's out there, and your face is in it."

"Where is everyone then?" Joyce asked.

"They're at some fucking, like, Santana concert or some shit. They were like super sad and shit and then they just decide like, 'let's go listen to some fucking Santana. I don't know. Weird shit. I don't like it. Did you know the guy is just the fucking guitar player? Fucking weird."

"They're at a concert?" Joyce asked.

"Yeah," Mikey answered.

"I was in a fucking coma and they went to a fucking concert?"

'Yeah, I guess. I was kinda mad about it earlier too but I just went to bed so I guess I didn't really care that much."

"Why the fuck would they go to a concert when I'm in a fucking coma?"

"I don't know, they said something about a distraction."

The doctor entered the room to ask Joyce some questions, and they had to stop talking.

Jenine and Neziz were too drunk to go to the hospital, they probably would've been detoxed for alcohol poisoning. So they went home while the restof their family went to see Joyce, having just woken up about an hour ago. They came into her room. She had her arms done up and crossed so that when they entered the room they'd know she was pissed that they weren't there before. She sat still, Mikey at her side, and Looked at her mother first. She gave her a glare and a squint, acting as if she didn't know her. Then she was hit with her feeling, that she was not meant to complain or take up space or be the center of attention, and this all fell away. She embraced her mother with open arms, and Sharon and Sharice came in turn. It was a sight to behold, as Joyce was normally completely off of the idea of physical contact, caring more about keeping herself clean and healthy than about getting any kind of physical touch. She felt like a leech, a parasite. She wanted to repay them.

The family talked to Joyce, asking her if the doctors had said anything to her about what was going to happen next, since they were completely unknowing of anything that might happen after someone wakes up from a month long coma.

Joyce said, "They said I have to take some kind of physical, like, rehab, or something. Like starting pretty much tomorrow. They're gonna, like, send me to some area and some guy is gonna determine how much atrophy they would've experienced. Or some shit like that, I don't know."

Sharon asked, "What about getting you home and like, school and stuff?"

"I don't know yet," Joyce replied, "I hope that they let me off free. Like, it's not really my problem that I OD'd right before a final, right?

I was in the hospital, in a coma, how exactly would I have taken the test. Plus the principal knows I would've aced it."

"Ok, but like, what about all the other shit? Like what about all the other kids in the class? Is that fair to them?" Sharice asked, in a very slow and monotone voice.

"I guess if they want to go into a fucking coma and almost die so they can get out of a test, they can do that. But me, that's not how it went down. This shit was an accident."

"So that's it then," Ariel said, "no more Adderall, right? You've learned your lesson?"

"Yeah, mom, no more Adderall. I don't want to end up an organ bag."

It was nighttime, about a week after she had begun physical rehab, and Joyce opened up a bottle of Adderall that she had stashed under her bed, in a small black bag that made it nearly impossible to see without a flashlight. She took out a pill and looked at it, checked the dosage, and crushed it in a dime bag, creating a fine blue powder. She rolled up a dollar bill and used it to snort the powder out of the bag, making sure to only snort a little bit at a time, in an effort to avoid overdose.

It had been over a month since her body had had Adderall, and although she was detoxed, in her mind it was the only thing in the world. She hid it well, though, better than she ever had before. She had made a promise to her family that she would get off the pills, that Jenine would cut back alongside her. She began to shake, just a bit, and decided that was enough for that night. Off a 12 mg pill, she had probably had about 2 mg. She could feel the magic pulse through ehr, much like the first time that she'd ever taken an Adderall, and started wondering if she should go into comas more often. She put the dime bag in her underwear drawer, and lied back onto her bed, observing life from a different perspective. Something about the coma made

everything click, she was a waste of fucking space and now, more than ever, she knew that. She gave an example to herself.

"Your mother paid $3500 just to keep you alive, and now you're sitting here snorting Adderall. You're not some kind of genius, you're a junkie, and everyone is figuring that out now. Actually, no, that's not true. Jenine knew. Jenine knew 100% that you were a worse junkie than her. She knew that you were on Adderall, all the way back in 6th grade she figured it out. Back when you really only bought half pills from that kid who sat next to you in chemistry. It was obvious to her. She had already tried it. She knew what it was like and she saw that you knew that too, so why was it always such a fucking secret. This big, nasty secret that you always had to hide. You wanted to be a genius? Well you're not. You're just a fucking junkie. A waste of fucking space. And now you know that, and that's important."

Joyce squinted her eyes and looked at the pattern on her ceiling tiles. Which seemed to interest her more than they normally would. They all had a purpose. Each one had a continuation of the same pattern. One would end there, and another would pick it up, and even if they didn't always line up perfectly, at least they were trying. She didn't try. She cheated. She cheated for years to get ahead, she took her little meth pills and acted like she was helping herself. She knew that was dumb. She wasn't that delusional. She knew, deep down, that she was just like the rest of them. And yet, suddenly, having her "secret" be outed filled her with such a sense of dread. She felt as if she might cry, but she didn't want to, so she held it in. She kept her eyes focused, and when they teared up she'd blink it all away. Then, she went to her underwear drawer, opened it up, took out her little bag of powdered Adderall, and started to snort it again, using the same dollar bill.

She thought to herself, "maybe I should just finish myself off. Do what Jenine never can. I know she wants to. At least I could beat her to it. Just overdose and die and then everyone gets to be sad for a couple weeks before they forget about me and get right back onto their bullshit. Maybe that's what I should do."

Someone knocked on Joyce's door. She was suddenly quite terrified.

On the door leading into Joyce's bedroom, there were 2 latches, 1 deadbolt, and a lock which needed a key for both the inside and outside. There was also a small hole that Joyce could look through. She installed the security herself. She looked through the hole, and saw no one there. She began to open it, unlatching each latch, taking off the deadbolt, and finally twisting the key in the lock. There, in a chair which moved, was Mikey. "How's it's?" he asked her.

"I don't really wanna talk right now, Mikey," Joyce replied.

"Damn," Mikey said back, "really?"

Joyce looked at Mikey, and decided that she'd talk to him. She remembered that he had tried to kill himself and decided that he was the kind of person that she could probably relate to or confide in or whatever the fuck else.

"Damn, bro, you got some mad shit in this room," said Mikey.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"It's all like, pink and white and blue and it's all so bright."

"Yeah? So what?"

"Nothing, man, it's just like... I don't know. I've never been in here. I didn't know what it looked like. Kinda thought your whole house was just painted that like, avocado green or whatever the fuck you call it."

"Yeah, well, everything in here, all the modifications, I did them. I don't rely on them to do shit for me, that's why I get shit done."

"You're being, like, really defensive right now and to be honest I don't understand why."

Joyce closed her eyes and inhaled. She had to sit down, as her legs were starting to feel like they'd come right out from under her. She said to Mikey, "I'm sorry. I'm just not used to having people, like, check in on me or whatever. It's weird. I don't want anyone to, like, think they need to take care of me. I'm not in a coma anymore. I'm really alright."

"To me," Mikey said, "it doesn't look like you're fine. I don't think you were fine before you OD'd, and the way you're acting gives me the vibe that you're just regressing back to that same mindset. Like, what were you doing before I came in here?"

"I wasn't doing anything."

"Come on, you were doing something, I heard you like, muttering or some shit."

"I wasn't. I was just sitting here, doing literally nothing."

Mikey looked at Joyce, and rose his eyebrows. He wheeled himself over to Joyce's dresser. Joyce looked at him intensely. Mikey opened her underwear drawer, and pulled out the dime bag of Adderall. "What's this?" he asked.

"I don't know."

"Joyce, it's a trick question. I already know what it is. You might've been in this scene for like, 4 years or whatever, but I've been in it for 10. Now just quit bullshitting me."

Joyce wouldn't respond.

"Come on, just talk to me."

Joyce began tearing up, "How did you know where it was?"

"Well, I guess because we've all known for a long time. Jenine used to come up here through the window and take a pill or two for us to party with back when we didn't really have good access to shit."

"So, you've been stealing from me this whole time."

"Look, Joyce, it's ok. It was a while ago. The point is, you shouldn't be so ashamed of this shit man. Shame isn't gonna make you stop. If it did, it already would've."

"You want to know what I was doing before you came in?"

"Yeah, I wanna know."

"I was thinking about killing myself."

"With the Adderall?"

"Yeah, with the Adderall?"

"That's kinda mean, man."

"I don't care. I'm not some perfect person. I'm not some fucking genius, ok? I'm just not. I'm not gonna get any better and I'm not gonna stop wanting to take Adderall, I'm not gonna be a good person. I'm not gonna make it and it was really fucking dumb of me to believe all that. And now I'm here, high on fucking Adderall, and I don't even have any excuse. I just want to fucking use it. I want it because it makes me feel good, and when I don't take it everything feels worse. And that's how it is."

"Yeah, but there's better ways to feel good."

"You don't get it, Mikey, nothing makes me feel good anymore. Not even the pills. It just makes it hurt less. It makes it more bearable."

"Joyce, I think you have a very skewed understanding of my life and the lives of your sisters."

"Dude, I don't want some fucking responsibility talk or whatever the fuck. They're fine. They've never OD'd. They never considered ODing to kill themselves. That's fucking me. That's not them."

"You're wrong, dude. That's what every single one of your sisters thinks. That's what I thought too before I got hit by the train. Having, like, near-death experiences shouldn't make you sink even further into the same destructive shit you did before, you know. You're supposed to build, and grow, and come back stronger and better."

"Oh yeah, like you fucking did that. You drink more now than you did before. You smoke more than you did before. You're around hereevery fucking day and you do nothing but sit in the smoking room and flirt with Sharon."

"Hey man, I don't flirt with Sharon, that's fucking creepy. And that's not fucking true. I do not drink more, I drink like 2 beers a day. I used to chug so fast that sometimes I'd just buy a whole fucking keg. You don't know everything about me Joyce, and I don't know much about

you. But I was the one who visited you in the hospital, every fucking day. When everyone else would go home for the night I'd stay and sleep there."

"That's fucking creepy, dude."

"You don't get it. I figured it out. I need to help you build and grow. I need to help you to break from your past self, and get out of that trap. I need to help you because in doing so, I can motivate myself to grow."

"Man, shut the fuck up. That's fucking it. This is some weird fucking groomer shit. You wanna help me? Help me grow? Why? So you can fucking pound me when I turn 18? You creepy motherfucker. Get the fuck out of my room."

"Look, I'm going to leave, but I want you to know that I still wanna help you. I know you're just being bitchy because you're high or whatever, so I'm not gonna hold it against you. Just let me know. You know where to find me."

Mikey wheeled himself out of the room, and Joyce hastily relocked the door.

Neziz was drinking with her mom in the kitchen. They had a bottle of white tequila and they were taking shots, room temperature, of the vile liquid. As Ariel continued to drink, she became more delirious, more belligerent, and soon she began to complain.

“I don’t fucking get it with that kid sometimes,” she said, “Joyce really acts like I’m some piece of shit because I went to a concert while she was in a coma. It was fucking Santana!”

Neziz was slurring her words, “It was a fun concert.”

“And she was in the fucking coma for 3 weeks! And I was fucking stressing the whole time. She acts like I’m some asshole, she’s the fucking asshole! All of you are! With your smoking and your pills and your overdoses.”

Neziz just laughed at the facial expressions Ariel was making.

“You know, I always thought Joyce was my good child. That’s why I trusted her. That’s why I let her do whatever she wanted because she wanted to do good things. And now she’s a junkie, hellbent on killing herself, just like the lot of you.”

“I don’t wanna die mom, I just wanna feel good,” Neziz said, resting her head on the countertop.

“‘Feel good, fucking shit, act like you feel good. If you fucking felt good you wouldn’t need all this shit. All the fucking pot and cigarettes and the fucking alcohol and fucking everything else. You’re just a fucking liar, you lie to yourself. You ruin your own mind and pretend it’s fucking fun. You fucking dumbass.”

“Ok mom, but like, so do you, I think? Like you used to do way more drugs. You used to do heroin. At least We don’t have scars running up our arms.”

“It took me years to get over that shit. And it wasn’t fucking fun. That’s how I know. I don’t know what I did wrong and none of you learned that. I can’t believe I didn’t teach you well enough.”

Neziz was pretty bored by the conversation and left it alone. She went to the smoking room.

“Hey,” Ariel yelled at her, “no smoking in my fucking basement.”

Neziz stumbled down the stairs, pulling a cigarette out of a pack and lighting it.

Jenine was hanging with Mikey, Neziz, Sharon, and Sharice outside of town. There was a half-abandoned town only about an hour away from Grapevine, so they piled into a couple of cars and drove out there. They were smoking a few cigarettes on the road but Neziz said they shouldn’t light any joints until they get out of Dallas. The freeway traffic was pretty intense. Even driving away from the city was slowed to a crawl. There was no movement for about five minutes, and that’s about the time that Jenine’s eyes started to drift out the window. The bright heat blinded the concrete from her vision, and the only visible thing was the images of people

which laid on the other side of clear glass windows. Two cars to her right had untinted windows. The one directly next to her was a family, a large one, in a van, on some sort of road trip. She watched one boy kicking his sister while leaning against the glass.

She looked into the other car. There were two brothers, very similar in appearance. They were talking, joking, and smoking. They seemed to be having a good time. She thought they were cute together.

Neziz looked over to her sister, who had been ignoring her conversation for quite some time. She peeked at her sister's focal point, seeing the car with the brothers and looking at them as well. "They're cute," she said.

Jenine looked back at her sister in the driver's seat. "Yeah, I guess so."

"They are, don't you think?" Neziz said in an insisting way, "redhead boys are cute."

"Yeah, I guess," Jenine replied, "they burn quick in the sun. You can't go to the beach with them. And then spring and summer is just wasted inside because they don't go outside."

"But they're like, freckled and junk. They're super cute. Their cocks are pretty cute," Neziz chuckled as her sister raised her eyebrows.

Jenine didn't stop looking at them until their lane got to move forward a good bit, when the boys were out of sight, covered by the sea of cars.

There's an abandoned factory that used to do leatherworking, in this ghost town section off the rest of the village. When the factory closed, due to some bad investments, the town cleared out. That was back in the 70s, but the land has already reclaimed the buildings, and many people, mostly high schoolers, would go there as a first step into abandoned building exploration, since it was well known and easy to get to, as well as being very safe. When Jenine and Neziz were in high school, they'd hang out here, so they do the same now with their little sisters.

Night was approaching, so they made a fire in the center of the factory floor, where it was concrete and far from any debris. There was extensive soot buildup on the ceiling of the factory

due to them and others doing this quite often. A couple of joints were lit, a bottle of Jack was opened, and a text was sent out by Jenine to the old group. Little by little, the party trickled in. 1 or 2 or 10 people would show up at once, and there was plenty of fun to go around. The fire was strong, and the night was young.

It was late in the night that they arrived, and Jenine was sitting by the open doors. They walked past her and toward the party, walking side by side with their clothes swaying as they stepped. Jenine looked up, saw them from behind, and she was stunned by the spectacle before her. In the black and red light, their bright clothes shined like an artpiece. They moved together to find a friend in the crowd. The redheaded brothers.

Jenine's heart ran on 8/4 time as she watched them disappear into the crowd. She recognized him, even in her inebriated state. She knew that she needed to talk to him. She stood, seeing stars and was off into the crowd herself, to find the Bingleys or her sister or someone. She needed to speak.

Neziz was standing in the back of the room, drinking, like her mother. There were 6 bottles of Jack, 2 bottles of Jameson, 2 cases of beer, an excess of boxed wine, and absinthe. That was what Neziz liked the most. Green absinthe is a delectable treat to her palate, and to secure it further she ensured that she was the only one with any sort of knowledge about the drink even being there. She was sipping the green, florecent, and herbal drink and waiting for something to happen. It was getting later and later in the party now, and she was still so unequivocally bored. She stopped drinking the absinthe, she walked in a roundabout way to the room which was only just to her left. She stepped inside.

Set up was a smoking room of sorts. Due to the pointless, unfounded illegality of marijuana, as well as the difficulty of hiding the associated accessories, led to these sorts of rooms forming at some parties which were not fully committed to this drug to form these smoking rooms, to localize and protect themselves from accusations from police. This ironically

had the effect that most people at the party were doing harder drugs which were easier to hide, mostly opioid pills.

Neziz came in and sat on a large, long, thin bean bag which was laid across the floor, helping to form the smoking circle. She waited her turn for the bong. The conversation was already running hot.

"Have you heard about the Bingleys? I heard they were here," one girl in the circle said.

"Bingleys?" A man next to her said. "Who the fuck are the Bingleys?"

"I heard that their dad is a part owner in Exxon-Mobil," a girl closer to Neziz said.

"I heard they got kicked out of their last school because they slept with the principal."

"How old are they?" Neziz asked.

"All different ages, there's like 6 of the bastards," someone said back.

Neziz got the bong and began to set up her hit. The bowl was something special, deep and wide and capable of holding an incredible amount of weed. From Neziz's eye, there was more than a couple grams packed in. She lit and bubbled and leaned back and exhaled. "I'll have to meet one sometime."

"Hard to miss 'em," the man to her right said as she passed him the bong, "They all have the reddest, curliest hair you've ever seen."

Neziz laid back further and thought about that in her mind. She pictured a boy with red curly hair, and she thought back throughout her life and looked at all the memories where she had seen someone with red hair. She laid back for a little over 30 seconds before she realized, "I think I saw a couple on the drive over here, stuck in a different lane of traffic."

"You'd know it if you did," someone replied.

Jenine was frantic, searching the crowd in the dark and red light, looking for him. The one she saw when they were driving, the one she saw enter the party. Red, curly hair, bright white skin. No sun, no UV. Where could they be?

She walked the crowd, with people dancing, moving erratically, making out, taking drugs, drinking, smoking, or overall just being at a party. Someone had brought molly and was giving it out to anyone who asked in little pills, one point. There was a girl with her tits out, something of a spectacle for the 3 frat boys who grinded on her. Something was true about Jenine in high school that never really went away, she threw bitchin' parties.

In her drowsy, ass backward way, Jenine stumbled her way across the dance floor, stopping and staring at anyone who happened to have curly hair.

There he was. She was sure. The same face, the same hair. This one was the driver. She watched him from a distance, from a place where he couldn't see her behind a couple people who were sharing shots in a circle. He was standing against the far back wall, drinking dark liquor and looking off to the side. She watched as another person walked up to him, someone who recognized him.

The spoke about something, he got off the wall and stood on his own to face him. It was his brother, they looked exactly the same. He shook his head in response to a question, and his brother looked around. Jenine could see his brother mouth out something that looked like "let's just go". The two started to walk out of the party.

Jenine was put into a panic, a necessary panic in her mind, so she allowed herself to succumb to it, to follow its whim and fancy. She pushed her way through the crowd, following the boys from afar so they wouldn't see her chasing them out. People were shoved every which way, and although she was tired she kept pushing through. She saw them leave the door and looked outside, from the same spot where she had been at the start of the party, and she saw the car they were in turn itself on and begin to drive off into the night. The car was gray, with an Oklahoma license plate, which she wrote the number of on her arm: 4S15Y6.

Sharon and Sharice didn't spend much time inside the party. They enjoyed it at the beginning, but when too many people started to show up, they left for the truck, receiving the keys from

Neziz. They sat in there, with the truck idling, windows cracked and smoking. They were, by 11, out of weed, and switched to the Marlboros which Neziz kept in the center console. Sharon was smoking it at the time. Sharice had her hand out, waiting for her turn to have the cigarette.

"I don't think I like parties, you know?" Sharon said.

"Yeah," Sharice replied, "that makes sense."

"Like, they're all in there just going around and getting their eardrums blown out," Sharon said, "like, what's the point?"

"Yeah, I like get it, you know. Like, we're having just as much fun just smoking in the car, why do we need all this other shit?"

"Yeah."

The two sat in silence, Sharon finally passed the cigarette to Sharice, and the two leaned back and closed their eyes. They were ready to pass out, the warm, thick air coating them like a blanket.

But eventually they heard a noise, something moving in the backseat. "Shit, did you hear that?" Sharon said.

Sharice sat up quickly, "yeah I think, was that in the car?"

"I think," Sharon said. She turned around in her seat and faced the back, Sharice did the same. They stared at the back seat of the car, trying to make out of there was someone there. Then, Sharon turned on the ceiling light in the back seat, and there, lying on the seat passed out, was Mikey.

Mikey sat up when the light turned on, instantly awake. The girls screamed, scaring themselves as much as Mikey. When it died down, Mikey rubbed his eyes and asked, "What the fuck is going on in here?"

"We were just smoking and shit and you were like, creeping in the backseat the whole time," Sharon said.

"Yeah what the fuck man?" Sharice said, pounding her hand against her chest.

“Calm the fuck down, I was fucking asleep. Goddamn it, how do none of you trust me yet. I’m not a fucking creep. How would I even creep? I have no fucking leg.”

“Well Joyce said we should be careful about you,” Sharon told him.

“Yeah, she said that you went in her room and freaked her out a couple days ago, tried to fuck her or something,” Sharice concurred.

“I did not try and fuck Joyce. Holy shit. Hold on. I need to think. You guys fucking hotboxed me in my sleep.”

“Why didn’t you just go sleep inside?” Sharon asked him.

“Because none of you fuckers listened to me when I said there wasn’t room for my chair in the truck. Jesus,” Mikey said, “I hang out with you guys all the time. I’m not a fucking creep. Have I ever, fucking once, made a pass at any of you before?”

“Yeah, Joyce,” Sharon said.

“I told you, I didn’t try to fuck Joyce. Jesus.”

The girls looked at each other. They didn’t really like Joyce. But they really liked drama. Was it possible they believed the hard to swallow lie that Joy e told them, knowing full well that she’s a manipulator, just because it meant more drama to talk about? Maybe. They didn’t really care though, and they realized this at the same time, looking at each other, as if they had a psychic connection.

“Okay,” Sharon said. She lit another cigarette and handed it to Mikey.

Mikey took the cigarette and began to smoke it. “I gotta find some new friends,” he said to himself.

Joyce was lying in her room, with the lights off, looking at her windows, and the new bars that had been placed over them. It cut up the image of the tree outside her window, which would normally be front and center, lit up by the street lamp and showing its leaves through winter. Now there was cast iron blocking its view into her room, and by extension ruining the ambience

that Joyce had become accustomed to after so many years sleeping there. She couldn't take her eyes off of it.

Even still, with the bars blocking the unimpeded egress of light to and from her room, she felt the night as she had when she was young. Her mind was slow and drowsy, and her eyes squinted involuntarily. She was incredibly sluggish, her hair heavy. It was late. Very late. She hadn't used any Adderall in 4 days. She was beginning to fight back against her withdrawal, but she felt like she was dying most of the time. But not this time. This time, things were calm, and she was able to think, and she was able to breathe, and relax. So she lied there, savoring it. A respite, finally.

She thought of the bars while she stared at them. She thought of how hot and cold they got every day and night. How cold would they be in the winter? How fast will they freeze?

She put her hand up in the air and felt the weight pull itself down on her shoulder, she felt the joint expand and her body and arm become disalligned. And then she pushed it. She heard a crack. She had dislocated her shoulder.

She focused on the pain. She thought about what it meant. She was now injured, and her body was making it hurt for that reason. The injury was not the reason for the pain, though, it was the nerves that caused it. And then she thought about her sisters and the drugs they use to fight their pain. And she stood up out of bed.

Her mother was asleep in the living room, on the couch, looking at a picture of the American flag. 2 a.m. End of broadcast day. She could hear it going and going and going in the back of her mind, although a couple rooms and a locked and latched door stood between her and her mother. She focused on it, the static sound of the TV. She felt it in her brain. Then she passed out.

She woke up the next day with her arm still dislocated. There was banging downstairs. She didn't remember falling asleep, she didn't remember hurting her arm. And suddenly, she realized it was a cry for help. And she realized she didn't want to make a cry for help.

She heard the house bustling beneath her. Her siblings and Mikey had returned late in the night, bringing with them the smell of smoke. Joyce lied still in bed. She thought about what it would look like if she came down there injured, ruined everyone's morning and made them take her back to the hospital. She had only recently gotten out. It would confirm what she heard her mom yell through the wall. She's a fucking junkie.

She lied still, doing nothing, hoping someone would check on her and help her.

Jenine woke up with a rather refreshed mindset that morning. She had a thought as soon as she opened her eyes. "The redhead".

She sat up and startled Mikey, who was sleeping in bed with her. He was filthy, having worn the same outfit without bathing for 3 weeks. "Jesus, Mikey, we have a shower," Jenine said.

"Uh-huh," Mikey said, going back to sleep.

Jenine got out of bed and left her room. She went downstairs, where Neziz and Ariel were watching recordings of Wheel of Fortune on VHS that had been made in 1997. They were skipping past the show and watching the commercials.

Jenine walked up behind the couch and touched her sister on the shoulder. Jenine said, "I need to talk to you about something alone."

"Ok," Neziz said. She stood up and they went to the kitchen to talk.

Jenine trusted her sister, but she knew she'd be teased for talking about a boy. She had a couple girlfriends in highschool, but she was always too scared to try and be with a boy. She gave herself some time to breathe before she told her.

"Look, Neziz, at the party last night I saw one of those redhead boys and I think I wanna fuck them," Jenine blurted out.

Neziz's eyebrows raised, "really? I knew you thought they were cute."

Jenine sat on the floor in the kitchen, she put her hand on her head. “I feel so stupid, I feel like I’m back in highschool. I’m so nervous. And I don’t even know anything about him. I don’t think he’s even seen me before.”

“That doesn’t matter,” Neziz said, “you’re barely at the start. You can get to know him.”

“Do you know him, have you ever seen them before?” Jenine asked.

“I’ve never met him, but I heard a little about them last night. They’re from Oklahoma, they just moved in. It was a lot of bullshit and rumors, but they might be rich. The most believable rumor I heard is that they moved down because their dad has long covid and they’re scared he might die soon. They own oil, some said Exxon-Mobil stock, others said the American Shell drills. Everyone is just chomping at the bit to figure out more about them, and it seems that they’re being met with a whole lot of nonsense.”

“Jeez, Neziz, how much can you scrub from one party?” Jenine asked.

“Well, there’s one more thing,” Neziz replied.

“What is it?” Jenine asked.

“They’ve got a shit ton of brothers.”

Mikey got out of bed in Neziz’s room. He was fully clothed, but he stunk. He could smell something rotten coming out of his clothes. He opened his pants and the smell was worse. Mikey realized what had happened. He shit his pants, drunk in the night.

He rushed to the bathroom, in the hallway, across from Ariel’s room. He locked the door, took off his clothes and realized that the shit had smeared up his back and under his shirt. He had no clue what he could do about this. There was no way for him to save himself from embarrassment. He had to come clean somehow.

He took a shower first. There was a fluffy, pink robe hanging on the door, and he put it on. He no longer stunk, but the bathroom wreaked. He sprayed air freshener, then waited, then sprayed again, then waited, making sure each time the he wasn’t spraying too much for the air to

be unbreathable. He cracked the window as well. The room stunk less, he thought. He dashed out of the room, hoping to be able to return to it with some kind of clothes.

In his bag, he had extra clothes. His bag, though, was in the smoking room. He was on the second floor. He was running back to the bathroom when Joyce's door opened, and she said, "Why the hell are you rolling around like this?"

Mikey sped up and then stopped. He turned and looked back at Joyce. "Joyce, I need your help. I need you to get my clothes out of my bag in the smoking room."

"I can't, creep," Joyce said back, "I think my arm is broken or something."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know, my shoulder hurts really bad."

Mikey wheeled himself over to Joyce, he grabbed her arm, and she yelped. He let go right away, "Sorry, jeez, that looks painful, I think you might need to go to the hospital."

"I can't go back to the hospital, creep, do you know how my family would look at me? They'd think I'm like self harming or something."

"Well, Joyce, I mean, it kinda seems like you are."

"Shut up creep."

"Ok, ok, look, ok, help me get my clothes and I'll pay for a cab to take you there so that you don't have to worry about your family finding out."

"Jesus, fine, creep. Just because I don't want you rubbing your dick all over my mom's robe."

Joyce stormed down the stairs. Mikey hid in the bathroom with the door locked.

Sharon and Sharice were lying down and talking in the smoking room.Sharice was lying down on the ground next to the couch, with her sister on the couch above her. Sharon was hogging the joint once again. She hit it 3 or 4 times per Sharice's 1. "I think that, like, there's no point in fighting diseases anymore. Like, we did it for a long time because there were so few people. But

like, now so many people are around that it's not even sad when millions die. Like, who cares if a million people die if there's 7 billion left when they go?"

"Yeah, that's true. Because like, a million people died in America in 2 years, and like, we don't even care. Like, now it's just fine, we all moved on. And like, we're fine. I don't know anyone who died from it. And like, we smoked the whole time. Could I get a fucking hit please?"

"Oh shit, yeah, sorry," Sharon passed the joint.

"Jesus, I've been waiting for like 5 fucking minutes."

"I said sorry, man, calm down."

Sharice smoked the joint greedily, like a meal for the starving.

Joyce came into the room and marched, holding her arm still with her other one. She moved directly past Sharon and Sharice, and to the back of the room. Sharice finished her smoking and sat up, handing the joint to Sharon. After a brief coughing fit, she asked Joyce, "so is Mikey really a creep or were you just being mean to him?"

"What do you mean?" Joyce asked in reply.

"Well, like, you told us that he like wants to have sex with you, that he tried to fuck you, but he said he didn't, and now you're looking for his bag."

"Well, i'm dealing with something," she had Mikey's backpack in her hand. Now being unable to secure her injured shoulder, a dull, groaning pain was building with every bounce of the foot.

"Did he fuck you? Or do you wanna fuck him?" Sharon asked, "because you're acting like his girlfriend."

"Jesus, you guys are fucking mental," Joyce replied, "fine, I lied. He doesn't want to fuck me. He just came in my room and said a bunch of shit about the meaning of life and he made me dump out my pills and shit."

"You dumped out your pills?" Sharice shouted, "How did he make you? Did he hit you? Are you hurt?"

“No, I’m ok, he didn’t like, force me. He like, just talked to me. He said that helping me get better is like his new reason to stay alive. And like, he got ran over by a train. I feel like he’s not scared to do it again. It’s a lot of pressure.”

“Jeez, man, that’s weird,” Sharice said, “I wouldn’t let some random guy like try to ‘fix me’ like that.”

“Ok, just, shut up, I gotta go,” Joyce said.

“Ok, bye babe, see you next month,” Sharon shouted as Joyce left.

Mikey was sitting on the toilet for a good while. He felt like he was on trial, waiting for a verdict. Guilty. Pant shitter. Leg killer. Idiot.

He sat in his chair, twisting the wheels back and forth to turn his body and looking around the bathroom, like a child in a spinning chair. He became dizzy and stopped. There was a knock on the door.

“Mikey are you in there?” Joyce whispered through the door.

Mikey opened the door a crack and shoved his hand at the opening, “Gimme it.”

“Yeah,” Joyce said, handing over the bag.

Mikey changed his clothes, and wrapped up his dirty laundry in the trashbag from the can. He put it in his bag and planned on throwing it away when he could. He strapped the bag to the handles on the back of his chair and opened the door again, wearing clean-er clothes, and looked at Joyce, who stood awkwardly in the hallway, waiting with her arm protecting her shoulder.

“Ok, so, can you, like, call the fucking cab for me? And I need money for it too. Mom took it all away so I can’t buy like anything,” Joyce blurted out.

“Yeah, yeah, hold on, yeah, ok, I’m calling, ok, hold on,” Mikey pulled out his wallet from his bag anf got out $40 for Joyce to take the cab with. Mikey called the cab. They waited at the

top of the stairs, and Joyce slowly helped Mikey down. “I’m coming with you, you know.” Mikey told her.

“What?” Joyce replied.

“You know, keep you out of trouble.”

“Oh so what, you’re my fucking chapperone?”

“Yeah, basically.”

Joyce huffed and brought Mikey the rest of the way down the stairs. He rolled himself to the door. Ariel was awake and lucid, moving around the house and patrolling for Joyce. When she saw her, her face lit up and she moved straight over to her. “Out of your room, are you?”

“Me and Joyce are gonna go to the park,” Mikey told her.

“Oh, yeah? The park?” Ariel responded.

“Just trying to get used to that sober lifestyle. This house doesn’t help,” Joyce said, gripping her shoulder as her pain swelled.

“Yeah? Ok, but you’ve got a test when you come back, so don’t be dumb, Joyce.”

“Yeah, whatever, go drug test the rest of your kids.”

Mikey wheeled himself out the door and Joyce followed. Their cab was there when they went out. They got in and went to the hospital.

Neziz went to pick up groceries and Jenine, Sharon, and Sharice were sitting in the smoking room trying hard not to think. Jenine was off 2 lines of oxy and a liter of beer.

Jenine was considering whether or not it was worth it to stay alive if all she did was numb herself. She was wondering if anything good would ever come of her life. She thought about what she wanted to do with herself. She thought she might have gone a different path if she’d known how this one would turn out. All of this, while Sharon was bugging the shit out of her.

“I just don’t think it makes any sense that we put people in jail for selling drugs,” she said, “I don’t think it makes any fucking sense.”

“Jesus, Sharon,” Jenine yelled at her, “I get it. You don’t understand it. Good fucking job. Why don’t you read a book about it or something? Fucking learn.”

“Oh, right, like you’ve read a book in the past decade,” Sharon retorted.

“I’m the only one who reads,” Sharice said, ignored by the rest of the girls.

“I’ve read more than you,” Jenine said back, “I’m a smart bitch, don’t fuck with me Sharon, you are fucking notoriously dumb.”

Sharice jabbed at Jenine with her elbow, “Shut the fuck up, Jenine, you’re being a fucking bitch.”

“Right, yeah, I’m being the bitch here, fuck you,” she said, smacking Sharice across the face.

Sharice and Jenine started to fight then, Jenine taking swipes at Sharice with her nails, trying to give her a missing eye, and Sharon trying to plow her head into Jenine.

“Jesus, what the fuck, what the fuck are you fucking doing,” Sharon said. She stood back from the action, scared of her sisters. Then, she came in to the aid of Sharice, kicking Jenine and pushing her over to get her sister away.

“Get the fuck out of here Jenine, you fucking bitch. Stay the fuck away from me and my fucking sister until you learn how to quit sucking,” Sharice said.

Jenine rolled on the floor, holding her stomach and groaning. Then she vomited and fell asleep. Sharon and Sharice stepped over her and left the room.

As Neziz got home, Sharon and Sharice were retreated to their room. Sharon was complaining about Jenine.

“You’re just lucky I was there to protect you,” Sharice said, “You know, for someone who complains so goddamn much, you really don’t defend yourself much, do you?”

“Fuck off, I can fight, I just avoid it more than you,”Sharon said, “you don’t understand, you’re too young.”

“Oh, right, so now I’m too young, yeah. Just because I’m the youngest sister doesn’t mean I’m stupid. In fact, I’d bet I know a hell of a lot more than you.”

“You don’t know things yet, what do you know, you’re 12,” Sharon said.

Sharice stood up, “I’m not as dumb as you, Sharon. I mean, I’m not like, some genius like Joyce is, but I do shit. I read, I study, I try to learn more and expand my mind. You don’t, everyone knows it.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” Sharon yelled, “You sound like fucking Jenine or some shit, shut up.”

“No, dude, sorry but like, when I’m at school people fucking still talk about you. I have to defend you, but the shit they say is true. You’re known as being the dumbest person in Grapevine, the dumbest in 70 years. They talk about how you wouldn’t survive on your own if you wanted to, because you spent all of school jerking off boys under the table.”

Sharon looked at her sister, and didn’t speak. She stared at her sister and let tears fall from her eyes. Then she stood up, stepped past her sister, and locked herself in the closet with the latch on the inside. She covered herself in clothing and laid curled up on the floor. She kept her eyes open and stared into the dark. Her eyes strained to look through the slats in the door. She could see Sharice out there, still standing, still looking at her. She couldn’t see the expression on her face, but she assumed it to be the same, this face of numbness and of confusion. She did not know what to do, and neither did her sister.

Sharon knew the truth. Sharon was a virgin. She never touched a boy. She didn’t want to.

Sharice stood still in the room, looking at the closet door for about 5 minutes. Then, she walked to the dresser and grabbed a cigarette out of the pack there, lighting it and leaving the room.

Sharon laid still and made her hands go numb underneath her. She refused to move, and as long as her willpower lasted, it would be used to keep her completely still.

Jenine felt a weight on her chest and a pain in her arm. She lied still on the ground in the smoking room. She saw colors, red, blue, green, a blur of all three. Then she fell asleep. In her dream she died. She had a heart attack and fell out of a train and off a bridge before falling into a meat grinder at the bottom. Then she was reassembled out of her own ground meat and killed again. This happened over and over again, in perpetuity, as she slept, and in her own mind she had spent an infinity doing this, going through this painful, endless cycle of death and reassembly. She woke up, still on the floor. She couldn't remember any of her dream.

She stood up. She felt better. She also really wanted a cigarette, there was a T.V show playing on CBS that had a man smoking on it and it was the first thing she saw when she awoke. She stood up, took 3 steps, and passed out again. This time, she didn't wake up so quickly. She had fallen and hit herself against the couch. She laid over it lazily, like she was trying to get the rest of her body onto it but she didn't quite have the energy to carry herself there. She had a dream this time where she was already dead for 20 years. She had a heart attack after inhaling too much cocaine and going for a run in the cold. She dropped dead in front of a bar in downtown Dallas. She clutched her chest, fell backward onto the curb, and broke her back in two places. Then, she woke up, lit a cigarette, and reinacted the dream over and over and over again. She died and came back and died again until she was numb to the whole experience, until her body no longer felt the pain in her chest and she was merely going through the motions of death, uncaring of the process or the destination.

Neziz was hovering over her in her dreamlike trance. She was looking at her upside down, saying something unintelligible. She took out her phone and called someone. Jenine could tell she was frantic, and just the knowledge that something exciting was going on was enough for her to keep herself awake. She still couldn't make out anything that her sister was

saying. She lied still on the couch and her sister took her head in her hands, stroking her hair and trying to make her feel better. Flashing lights appeared out the window in a matter of time that felt equally like nothing and an eternity.

Joyce was unaffected by the news of her sister's injuries. Jenine had what the doctors called a "cardiac episode" and was being kept in the hospital so they could monitor her more closely. Joyce, though, refused to visit her. She thought it was silly that she should visit her when Jenine went to a concert while she was in a coma.

Ariel was screaming at most hours now. She was becoming less and less able to pay hospital bills, having to, over and over again, call their father and have him take on the debt, a practice which she hated more than pain. She would spend hours and hours in her room, yelling at nobody and making a ruckus, banging around and then cleaning up her room. She came out twice a day most days, once to use the bathroom and once to eat. Sharice said that she saw her come out with a bottle full of piss once.

Joyce sat in her room researching different colleges and universities across Texas, New Mexico, Oregon, and New York. She considered most seriously New Mexico Tech., Oregon State University, and University of Buffalo. As she researched more and more, she realized something that she'd never considered before: she had no idea what she wanted to study, and no idea what she was actually interested in. For so long she had only cared about school and grades, she had devoted her life to the straight A's and getting ahead of her peers, that she never picked up any hobbies or intellectual interests, and now it was October, she was already half way through her gap semester, and she was still completely unaware of what she was planning on doing.

She sat there and tried her best to consider herself, to consider what she was interested in and to fully understand herself. But it all came up blank. She hadn't volunteered or joined any groups, not even study groups. She realized, sat there in her room surrounded by her books and

computer and all the things that she had collected over the years, that nothing mattered to her. That all she cared about was the letter on the report card.

She became very depressed. She felt as if she wasn't a real person. She stood up but ended up putting too much weight on her arm, the one she'd dislocated a couple of weeks before, and it hurt a bit. She let out a gasp and grabbed it until it started to feel better. Her hair fell in front of her face, and when she blew it out of the way it didn't move. She thrashed her good arm in the air and whacked herself in the head. Then she sat down and just thought for a little bit. She needed help, but she had no one she felt she could trust.

She went to the only person who had expressed a want to help her anytime in the last year, Mikey. Of course Mikey was at home with his mom at the time, so she got in an Uber to his place, about an hour away. When she got there it was 3 p.m. She hadn't notified Mikey she'd be coming over. She wanted it to be like it was the 90s and she didn't have a phone and she was just going to see a friend. But she didn't think of Mikey as her friend, so then, she thought, an acquaintance.

Mikey's mom answered the door. She had grass in her hair. Joyce thought it was weird that she'd just be walking around with grass in her hair. "Who are you?" she said in Joyce's absence of speech.

"I'm Joyce Bennet, I'm a friend of Mikey's."

"Ach, Mikey," she said.

"Where are you from?"

"I'm from Fredricksberg, what do you mean?"

"Is that in… Ireland?"

"What, no, it's west of Austin."

Then Mikey arrived at the door, in his chair, "hey Joyce," he said.

"Hey Mikey."

Mikey's mother stood there for a second and then left. She went into the house where Joyce couldn't see her, but Joyce could feel that she was still listening from where she was.

"So," Mikey began, "what do you want?"

"Well, Mikey, I don't know," Joyce replied.

Mikey squinted at her, confused.

"Well, I guess, uhm, I need some help, with some stuff, like about school and stuff."

Mikey let her in the door.

Ariel visited Jenine in the hospital one night, about 3 days into her observation. The doctors were trying to stabilize her heart still, and from time to time it would speed up or slow down to unnatural levels. Ariel sat next to Jenine in the chair while Jenine slept. She looked at her, and thought about when she was being raised. She remembered taking her to parks when she was little, her first day of school, and the first time that she ever got caught with a cigarette. She remembered it all in flashes, at the same time. She saw Jenine lying there and she thought that it was peaceful. She thought about just killing her. But she didn't.

She got the stationary notepad out of the drawer next to the bed and started to write something down.

"Jenine, I'm sick of this. I can't keep going through this heartbreak, this feeling of pain every time you smoke and every time you come home late and everytime I see you passed out on some fucking couch. I just can't handle it anymore. I've decided that if you're not gonna care about your life, your plans, anything really. I'm gonna stop caring about you if it's the last thing I do. And to help me I've decided you and Neziz will be moving out by the end of October. I'm not going to be helping you, not in any way. When you come home, I want you to pack right away and start looking for a job and housing. I'm already having Neziz start, she'll probably find the two of you housing if you're willing to live with her, I'm sure you are. I'm making the other girls make plans for their future, school and work and shit like that. They have to have those done by

the end of October too. I just don't want you to feel like I'm being unfair. I've put up with this for 10 years now with you Jenine. It's too much for me to put up with anymore. I'm not as strong as I used to. Please don't be mad with me."

She folded the paper in half and wrote JENINE on it in big letters. She left it on the seat and left the hospital.

Neziz was driving for just shy of 7 hours. Her mom gave her $40 to spend on gas so she decided to use it all before she came home. She applied for 16 jobs that day in person and another 29 online, throwing her weight into this idea of work. She was going to be kicked out on November first, which was in only 2 weeks. She needed a job so she could get housing.

She began to research the best ways to get housing nearby. Some people online said that it's best to buy or mortgage land and then put a trailer house on it, since over time it's cheaper than renting or owning a house in a suburb or even in urban areas. She also looked into some project housing owned by the DHA, but figured that they wouldn't want to help some rich girls who were getting cut off by their parents. She started to look at apartments, but the ones online all said that you had to already have a job to apply, that they'd deny anyone who applied without 3 pay stubs.

She went to sleep defeated. She couldn't get a job and she couldn't get housing. On November 1st, she would be thrown out to the street with no safety net, she was sure of it.

When she woke up, Jenine had come home and laid in her bed. The house was cold and her sister was warm. She laid with her eyes open, fully awake. Neziz watched her for a second before she touched her on the arm. Jenine turned toward her quickly, hey eyes wide. "So, we're being kicked out."

"That's the way it looks," Neziz responded.

The two laid and turned their heads back to the ceiling. "I've been applying to jobs every day since Sunday. I haven't gotten a call back yet."

“How many jobs have you applied to?” Jenine asked.

“I don’t know, like a hundred. I’m so tired.”

“I’m gonna start today, I don’t have any idea where to look.”

“Well, take my advice, do not apply in person. It’s a waste of time. Just apply online and then meet them in person for an interview. I spent 7 hours yesterday burning gas and applying for jobs all over Dallas, and nothing came of it.”

“Hey, that’s one thing. If we get kicked out before we find housing, we could live in the truck for a bit. It’s nice and wide and we could both lay down comfortably.”

“I don’t want it to come to that. It’s gonna be another freeze this year over winter. That’s what people are saying. We need some place where we can have a fire inside when the power goes out, and we don’t want to rely on gasoline for heating and electricity. Besides, it’s a lot easier to steal a truck than a house.”

Jenine lied down and sighed, “I just wish I would’ve died a long time ago. Before I’d have to deal with all this.”

Joyce and Mikey were sitting in his mom’s backyard, smoking cigarettes and waiting for nighttime. That night there was supposed to be some kind of meteor shower and she was hanging out to see it. Mikey had seen it the last time it came through, about 7 years ago, when he was only 14 years old. Now he was gonna see it again, with so many things having changed in that time. Joyce was considering not going to college. She had an idea that she might just be an artist.

In her head she was writing a novel about all the things going on around her. She was quite focused on this relationship she was building with Mikey. She’d never gotten along with Mikey before his attempt at suicide, he was much like her sisters then. He romanticized death, saw it as something to strive to. It was his attempt that showed him how wrong he was. Death wasn’t romantic, he’d found out, it’s gory and painful and awful and the whole time it’s

happening you wish it'd just stop. Then, when you survive, you feel stupid, you feel like you should've known it wouldn't have happened and you feel like you should've seen it coming a mile away. That's the feeling that makes most people want to try it again, or never try it again. Either they think they should prove themselves wrong, or they see it as impossible. Mikey knew very well it was possible, however, since part of him died with all of it. And that's what made him want to never do it again. Joyce respected that.

The sun was going down and she was still burning the same cigarette, putting it out gently after each drag so it would last her longer. It was the first cigarette she'd smoked around another person. She sat still and Mikey didn't say much.

"Do you ever wonder if it's worth it to engage in society?" Joyce asked him.

"Nah, I don't. I just know that it is," Mikey replied.

"How can you know, though? How can you know that it's better?"

"Because," Mikey explained, "if you don't participate in society, there's only you. When we were all just hunters, roaming the land and killing whatever animals for food, if you didn't have society, you wouldn't be able to live. You'd have to work around the clock to survive. It's not sustainable. You'd die before you reached 10. Besides, you wouldn't have been able to survive if not for your parents and your family and community taking care of you. When I was a kid, I couldn't wipe my own ass until I was 4. There's no way I'd be alive today if I didn't have a society to exist in."

Joyce saw a meteor fall and pointed it out to Mikey. She relit her cigarette, and took a drag, burning her fingers.

As the night dragged on, Neziz continued to shovel her piles of laundry into boxes from her closet. Her mom had even mocked up eviction papers. At 26, Neziz was being forced out of her house and made to roam the world with no support. Jenine had not looked for a job, in fact she claimed to still be feeling withdrawal symptoms despite her detox. Neziz thought that was fine,

she understood how addictive it was and just encouraged her to keep clean, she kept saying things would get better. It was November 29th. Neziz found an apartment in downtown Dallas and they were moving in their stuff the next day, with the locks being changed on Ariel's house at 3 p.m on December 1st.

Jenine was pleading with Neziz to take her out and get her something, and to kill her, and to let her suffering end, but Neziz just sat there, packing. Jenine owned 2 large boxes worth of clothes, a box for her old journals and books, and a small one for her valuables. For Neziz, they would need closer to 20 boxes just for clothes, her closet was a walk-in which was extremely disorganized, in the back there were piles of clothes that she hadn't seen since middle school, eaten away by worms and moths.

She decided to just take the front part and anything expensive. She'd likely need to sell things to keep afloat if she lost her job at Pizza Hut. Jenine was applying at a few places a week, about 3 or 4, but she knew that even if they called her in for an interview, she'd fail it, so she didn't bother much. She was considering just unburdening Neziz by moving in with her father, an offer which has always been open to the girls but never exercised. It did mean, in turn, that Ariel would never speak to you again, if you were to "go against all that she had done to save you from that wicked man".

Jenine and Neziz slept in their own place for the first time that night, with no furniture. They had brought over their necessities, blankets, a pillow, and cockroach spray. There was an infestation in their studio which needed to be addressed.

Sharon and Sharice met at Neziz's room and started to tear out all the clothes and throw them away. Much of it had been destroyed in one way or another, whether it be torn through being roughly worn or eaten away over time by bugs and rubbing and waterlogging and mold. It stunk in the closet. The dumpster had been filled long before they finished cleaning it out, so they started to pile up the rest of the garbage from her room into the closet to be taken out after trash

day. They tore her Minnie Mouse string lights down from the wall, they took any money they found and put it in a jar to be split afterward between them, they brought in plastic tarp and masking tape and covered the carpet and ceiling, prepping the room to be painted.

The walls were an insufferable bright pink, which showed the dirt which had formed on it over the years, the skids from her shoes repeatedly bumping against the walls from when she'd throw herself on her bed after school and begin smoking near immediately.

"What color are we doing for this?" Sharice asked her sister.

"Something dark, something that won't reflect too much light and expose the haze," Sharon responded.

"Maybe purple," Sharice said, envisioning a dark purple fitting to suck the light out of the room, but still allow for a positive visual experience if desired.

"No," Sharon said, "I think black."

Sharice squinted at her sister. "I don't think that would look good."

"Why not?"

"You're gonna look like an idiot if anyone comes over."

"Why would that happen?"

"Because, Sharon, it's fucking ugly."

"Shut up, it's not ugly, it would look good."

"Oh my fucking god, I will not live in a black room."

"Since when are you being such a bitch to me?" Sharon said.

"I'm not, I'm just not gonna do whatever you want anymore," Sharice replied, "you don't know everything, I have good ideas."

"You know what, this is my fucking room. You get the fuck out. Go back to your shitty room. This is gonna be my cool room."

Sharice left and slammed the door. Sharon cried, taping tarp down to protect the floor.

Joyce was in her room, listening to the commotion of her sisters through the wall. When the conflict reached a head, she heard Sharon yell and the door slam. A few seconds later, her youngest sister, Sharice, knocked on her door.

Joyce managed to keep her locks after all. This was part of Ariel's new plan which Joyce called the "call it quits" theatre. She went to the door and meticulously unlocked each lock to open it, and Sharice was there with tears welling in her eyes. Joyce thought about how even though she was 18 and her sister only 12, that her sister was an inch taller than her, and that she'd likely keep growing far past Joyce's measly 5'3". "You can come in, Sharice, I heard what happened."

Sharice came in and marched to Sharice's bed, plopping herself down hard and whimpering profusely. Joyce locked the door. "I'm sick of associating myself with Sharon. Everyone thinks I'm dumb, I've always just let her talk and do what she wants, and I've even looked up to her, but since I started meeting people who's siblings know her in high school I just can't do it anymore. She's just so fucking dumb. She's not like the rest of us, she is just fucking stupid." There was more Sharice wanted to say, about her recently having been getting into youtube videos on philosophy, but she was sure that if she talked about it she'd be ridiculed by the more knowledgeable other.

Joyce simply stated, "I don't think you should put much weight in what people say in middle school, or even high school. None of that matters in the real world. The city is bigger than the hallways, you know."

"I know, I know that, I just can't handle it anymore," Sharice said.

Joyce had been reading some psychology books at the behest of Mikey, who said "if you want to know why your family is so dysfunctional, you should look into, like, narcissism or something. Like, I think your dad is a narcissist and maybe that's why you guys can't figure out how to get along." She learned one skill so far, which was questioning. "How does that make you feel?" she asked Sharice.

“How does what make me feel?”

“Well, with Sharon it seems like you’re giving up, like you’re leaving her to her own devices, so how does it feel to be doing that? What feelings are leading to that?”

Sharice thought for a second, it was long enough that she stopped crying and started to think very frankly, “I feel like Sharon is holding me back. And I feel like I’m a shitty person for not wanting to keep pulling her weight.”

Joyce sat there and talked to Sharice for some time about her troubles at school, with people saying that since Sharon is stupid that Sharice probably is too, and how she’s been reading and writing and trying to learn more to prove them wrong. Then Joyce asked, “why do you think Sharon is stupid? Or, like, why do you think that Sharon isn’t good at school and all that?”

“I don’t know,” Sharice replied, “I think she was just born that way.”

“I don’t think that’s it. People can be born dumber than others, sure, but it’s not as if Sharon is reading at a 4th grade level. Do you think it might be something environmental?”

“So what,” Sharice replied, “like, it’s her fault that she’d dumb?”

“No, no, I’m just saying that something in her environment might be restricting her mind.”

Sharice thought for some time about what that would mean, what would be the difference in her environment. “I don’t know,” was the only answer she could muster.

“Look, I’m gonna tell you something and you’re gonna think it’s stupid but that’s because you’re an addict. Weed fucking killed her brain. She started smoking when Jenine introduced her to weed when she was only 9. Her frontal lobe is stunted and is not fully developed, which makes her decision making skills worse than you or I. And Sharice, you are going down the same path.”

Sharice lied down on the bed and stayed still for quite some time. She thought hard about what Joyce had said. “Fuck me,” she blurted out.

Jenine tried to quit smoking 6 times in her 22 years on earth, and this time, starting on her 23 birthday, would be forced upon her by one thing and one thing only: she was fucking poor.

Jenine birthday was November 3rd, 2 days after she had moved in with her sister to an apartment in downtown Dallas, 1 week after they'd moved all their stuff there, and 1 month before they would be locked out of their mom's house for good, only allowed in for visits and always when someone else was home. This was because Ariel was convinced that despite her detox, Jenine was likely to come back home and rob the place, looking for valuables and money that she could spend on drugs or rent. Ariel was very clear about the cut off. She would, on December 1st, no longer be paying any of their bills, including insurance and medical, and that if they wanted any outside help, they'd have to call their father and see if he'd do it.

Jenine had also not had a cigarette in 2 days by the time her birthday rolled around, since Neziz decided she'd be quitting to save money and Jenine forgot her pack at Ariel's house and Sharon had found them and smoked them all. She was in a whole other kind of detox, then, since even at the hospital, they allowed her to go outside and have a cigarette. The withdrawals were giving her extreme headaches, splitting straight from the center of her forehead to the back of her brain. Her vision was clouded with hallucinations of empty space, where her brain was simply not processing what she was seeing and was making up a mess of grey and black blobs and swirls to fill it.

Neziz, however, insisted they'd go out to celebrate. They went to one of the sandwich shops not too far from their house, only 10 minutes by car, called "Picorni's". They were certain that "Picorni" was not a real name and that it was only made up to sound Italian, but they decided it was good enough.

"So, how's your 'italian' sub?" Neziz asked Jenine at the table.

"It's ok, I'm sorry you had to pay for it, I know that job isn't paying you much."

"That's ok, Jenine, I know things are hard right now and you need a break."

Neziz was always taking care of her sister, even when they were kids. She was 3, about to turn 4 in February, when her sister was born. She fell in love with her the first time she got to hold her, when she was taken home from the hospital. Jenine, of course, was a pre-mie, and had to be kept in neo-natal ICU for a month before she was healthy enough to take home. Neziz was so excited the day she came home that she set up a parade in the halls of their house, using her stuffed animals to form a line down the entire house. She always took care of her baby sister.

Neziz had a similar headache which was only diminished by the fact that it had been going on for longer than Jenine's and she was getting used to it. She ate her sandwich and didn't think about much else. She was just happy that Jenine was seemingly committed to sobriety.

They had lunch quickly and stood up to pay and leave. The register had a glass section with candy and cookies for kids to bug their parents to buy them. Neziz bought a pack of doublemint gum. She gave her sister a piece and put the rest of the pack in her pocket. Then she walked with her sister to her truck, sitting down and putting another piece of gum in her mouth.

"Things are gonna get better soon, Jenine," Neziz told her sister.

Jenine rolled in the seat, lying down and trying to sleep.

Joyce went to a college party nearby. The house was quiet at most hours by then. Ariel was so sick with regret, but she wouldn't say it, Joyce only knew since she had that look on her face, snarled and scrunched, in a constant pout.

There was drinking and smoking but not much else. She thought about how Jenine would say that this is too softcore for her, and she'd retreat to the corner with a couple other coke heads and opiate addicts. Joyce got a few ounces of beer with an ounce of foam clouding to the top of the cup, which was what Europeans call the "standard American Red Solo cups". She sat down and thought about how she didn't know anyone at the party, and she was there all alone. She had seen plenty of them in high school, of course, but she never met a single one of

them, outside of lab partners who'd leave her to do all the work and minor conversations in the bathroom.

She recognized one girl who had made fun of her a couple times when she was in middle school. Back then Joyce had a sugar addiction, much for the same reason as her adderall addiction, she used it to help her study. Her name was Yui, she was born somewhere else and moved here when she was very young, and in 7th grade she wrote "pig" all over Joyce's locker in sharpie. It turns out that she didn't like that Joyce was top of the class. Yui had to clean it after a bit, but she never did a very good job and she left plenty of visible "pig"'s for Joyce to find. Joyce thought about going up and smashing something in her face. She just looked at her though, through the doorway, in the kitchen, where she was drinking and talking and having a thousand times more fun than Joyce. Joyce just stared for too long and finally looked away when someone touched her arm.

"You're not meant to stare, it's rude," he said to Joyce.

"Shut up, creep, get fucking bloated," Joyce said, pulling her arm back from him and sneering.

"Ach, you're the creep here, and I'm the cool," he said back to her, pointing his thumb toward himself.

Something about the way he was talking to her reminded her of Mikey, who reminded her of her dad.

"Wha's your name?" he asked her. She couldn't tell if he was accented or just talking loudly.

"Yeth Ziznikinizi," she answered.

"That's funny, 'am Paul," he said to her, "'am visiting from Scotland."

"Scotland? Why the hell would you come here from Scotland?"

"For this, for the lifestyle," he leaned in closer, "and between you and me, I'm escaping the winter back home."

“Oh, winter’s already started for you?”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah, so you came to Dallas to be a creep,” Joyce said reflexively, trying to get him to leave her alone.

“You’re antagonistic,” he said back to her. Her heart fluttered harder than she’d felt in a long time. “You ought to be careful, being antagonistic. I can see you’re not a big party girl, but being fun is part of the game.”

“I’m fun,” she said back, “I just got here.”

“If you’re so fun, why don’t you get up and do something with me?”

Joyce looked at him, and in an instant she understood where the night was going. She decided she was gonna let it happen. “What do you have in mind?” she replied.

“Why does Joyce get to go out and not me? I wanna go to a party,” Sharice asked her mother.

“Because you are fucking 12, I’m not having this conversation again, we’re changing the rules in this house,” Ariel responded.

“So I can’t go out either?” Sharon asked.

“Sharon, you are too young to be going out to college parties and getting drunk and smoking. I can’t believe I have to say this.”

“This is so stupid,” Sharice said, “we’ve never had to stay home, it was always all of us going to the party. All of us. It’s not even that far away.”

“Look, turn 18 and you can do whatever the hell you want,” Ariel said, “but for now, go to school and graduate, or you’re out of the fucking house.”

Ariel went into her room and slammed the door. She had a wine bottle collection in there from the past few weeks, which was piling up more and more and more every day as she’d go through her daily grieving. Something about not working, relying on alimony and child support, had been eating away at her over the years, she felt as if she knew nobody anymore. She was

reading a romance novel from Walgreens and shooting back glasses of wine, one after another, until she fell asleep.

Sharon and Sharice would normally just sneak out from the house, hop the gate and be free, but there were now cameras on the property and they had no one to drive them there anyways. So instead they sat in the smoking room.

Sharon had no weed left and was desperate for more, to the point that she was searching her room for anything that might be left. Joyce's old room had one wall fully painted, tar black, with the bucket of paint sitting on the floor with brushes and rollers. With so many people gone from the house, the winds of the season were the only thing audible within the house.

Sharice sat still in the smoking room, cigarette in hand, smoking as always. She was fine with there not being weed, she decided, against all her impulses and desires, she knew that she was fine, because she wanted to stop doing it anyways. Sharon burst into the room with a miniscule nug she found in an old bag from years ago, stuffed deep under her bed, and a pipe. She loaded the pipe and lit it, the bit of weed in there sparked up, let out a bit of smoke, and then shot down the pipe and into the back of her throat. She moved, then, into a violent coughing fit which lasted around 2 minutes, before sitting down next to Sharice.

"So, are you gonna graduate?" Sharice asked her sister.

"I think I have to, I don't think there's another choice," she responded.

"Yeah, I'm gonna graduate too," Sharice started, "you know, I've been thinking a lot about, like, drugs and stuff. I don't know if I'm gonna keep doing so much for now."

"Yeah? Like, what, you're gonna quit?" Sharon asked.

"I guess so, for now at least. I don't think I'll quit the cigarettes though. I just don't want my brain to be all mush by the time I'm an adult."

Sharon didn't think much about what Sharice said. She used the back of the lighter to push the resin off the sides of the bowl, into a clump near the air intake. Then she started to smoke it. "I don't think I'll be quitting any time soon," Sharon said.

Joyce got straight up railed back in Paul's apartment. It was her first time and it wasn't as bad as she thought it could get. He was rough but seemingly caring, and afterward he held her. They stayed in his bed all night, but she didn't sleep, her heart couldn't stop pounding at the thought that she'd gotten together with someone in that way.

In the morning they talked a lot more about themselves. The night before was all fun and no substance, so the substance was something they needed to catch up with. He said that he was actually just a grad student at the university, and that he'd been there all semester. He was planning on staying there, since it was warmer than Glasgow and he felt satisfied with his situation.

"Far cry from 'visiting' don't you think?" Joyce said.

"Well, you know, American girls like the experience of being with European boys. D'ya know, you're the first one who ever stayed the night? 'Av had sumit like 6 girls over this semester, none of 'em stayed."

"Is that disappointing?" she asked.

"No, no 'am not disappointed, it makes me like you more," Paul said back to her.

"Oh yeah?" she said, trying hard not to sound genuine, to leave open the opportunity of not seeing him again. She felt her heart race. She thought she might actually like Paul.

"Yeah, and I'm thinking, maybe I could take you out on a real date sometime," Paul said to her.

Joyce had never been on a date. "That sounds nice," she said.

He made them breakfast, an "English Breakfast" as he called it, although it was merely bacon, eggs, and toast, which Joyce knew well as "American Breakfast". She held her tongue on it though. He drove her home in a Mini Cooper.

"Hey, I just wanna thank you for the night," she said, "I don't get out much so it was nice being there with you."

His smile grew wide and he gave her a kiss on the cheek. “I had a great night with you too, Joyce.”

She got out of the car and buzzed the gate open so she could get in.

Jenine’s head felt like an overinflated basketball, ready to burst at the slightest knock. She had $2 in her wallet and no prospect of work. All she wanted in the whole world was a cigarette. She had no idea how Neziz could handle it.

Neziz was at her job at Pizza Hut. She worked as a server which, because it was a buffet, mostly meant her job was to help people get seated and then get them their drinks whenever they need them. When they went to leave, she would check them out at the front so she could collect her tip and give them a good sendoff. In reality, her job was to wait around for about half the time she was there. She found herself sneaking in the kitchen and talking to the employees there, since the store was often quite empty and the other servers were too young for her to relate with them.

It was there that she started using nicorette gum, at the suggestion of a cook she had met. She was then able to reduce her withdrawal headaches and keep up with work. However, until she got her 3rd paycheck, she wouldn’t be able to afford a whole box (+$20 for 20 pieces of gum?!) so she bought it from the cook who suggested it in the first place, piece my piece, for $2, and would use the piece for the rest of the day, taking advantage of the placebo it would give after it ran out of sting.

She desperately wanted to get more so she could give some to Jenine. She bought an extra piece that day, November 21, and saved it in her bag.

She gave it to Jenine and she refused it, “I can’t, I need a cigarette. There’s nothing else that can help me.”

Neziz looked at her sister and how she’d been bundled up, for the past week, she thought. She had just been lying there with nothing to do and no motivation to get up. So she caved. She

walked to the store and bought a pack of cigarettes for her sister. She told her that she needed to make them last and that they might not be able to afford more for a long time, and Jenine broke down in tears, thanking her profusely, going outside into the breeze in nothing but her underwear and a loose shirt, and lit the stick.

Everything cleared, as if she had found the cure to life itself. She smoked it halfway and Neziz reminded her that she should save some for later, so she carefully put it out on the concrete porch so as not to crush it, and for a moment she felt relief.

Neziz said that if she wants more cigarettes, she needs to look for a job so she can buy them herself. She spent the rest of the day talking with her about different jobs she could work. When the sun went down, Jenine slept for the first time in 2 weeks.

Mikey sat alone in his room, eating food his mother had made for him, a stew made of chipped beef, frozen vegetables, and macaroni elbows. He ate the bowl slowly, and let the heat seep into him from the liquid. There was no heating whatsoever in his mother's house just northwest of Dallas. In fact, the electricity had been cut off a few days earlier. His mother was unable to afford to pay for it.

As a nurse, she was quite knowledgable to her son's needs, and credited herself entirely to his speedy recovery after his attempt, both physically and mentally. However, for the time being, she was so in debt to the very hospital she worked at that she was unable to pay other bills. She feared that as winter approached, she would find her son dead in the morning, frozen in his sleep. Mikey was aware of this and was incredibly guilty.

As his soup left, he lied down. With no electricity, the only warmth in the house would come from the oven or the stove, so his mother made an effort to cook things in the oven or on the stovetop for a long time, so the house could get a little head start. It did make the air feel warmer to Mikey, even if it was just a placebo.

Mikey's mother left for work at 6 p.m. She worked this shift because she needed extra hours. When she got back in the morning, she would collapse, having spent 24 of the last 48 hours working, and pass out. But, to her it was worth it, she would be able to afford electricity and maybe some fire wood for the fire place in case power gets shut off again during the winter.

When she was a girl, she never had to buy firewood. Her family simply cut down the trees. Then they would dry out over the next season, and finally, they'd be burned over winter. It wasn't until she moved to the city that the idea of "paying for heating" was finally imposed on her.

Mikey lit a candle and read a book he had found which belonged to his mother, written by a Russian Anarchist who lived in New York in the early 1900s.

Joyce's Diary held her innermost thoughts and hid them behind hours of rambling and drawings and shitty art projects. She wrote in it most nights if she didn't forget. She felt quite guilty when she'd forget to do it, it made a knot in her stomach that she couldn't dissuade but with a written apology. That night she wrote about a recurring nightmare that she'd only now noticed. Time and time again, she would be dreaming and remember it then, that this dream is not the first showing, and forget it when she woke up. The last night, her subconscious had finally decided to stop forgetting and just let her know what happened when she woke up.

"In the dream, I'm a vampire," she wrote, "I go to places and suck the life out of people. It always starts out with me clearing this corner in Dallas at this store, it's an ugly gray wall of stucco, and around the corner there's a person turned away from me. I go up and I suck the life out of him and then I move on. This happens almost every night now, I'm surprised this is the first time my conscious mind has remembered it. I just fear having the dream again tonight, I might have no control just the same, and do all the terrible things I do every other time, but I bet I'm gonna remember it more often from now on. I feel really sad about it. I hope I don't have it again."

Sharice knocked on Joyce's door. Joyce opened it very quickly, and said, "What's happening?"

Sharice asked, "do you want to hang out for a little bit?"

Joyce did have a soft spot for Sharice in a way she didn't with the rest of the family. Sharice was so young, there was no way that any of this shit was her fault. So Joyce agreed to hang out.

"What do you do in here?" Sharice asked, plopping herself thusly onto Joyce's bed.

"I don't know, not much," Joyce replied. "Sometimes I try and make things. Sometimes I just lay down."

"Jeez, I guess you're out of things to do without school, huh?"

"Yeah, I guess."

"Well, maybe we can do things together."

"Yeah, of course."

"Can I look at the things you've made?"

"Ok."

Joyce opened a drawer on her desk where she kept finished projects. She enjoyed drawing pictures of landscapes and nude portraits of women from porn videos. She kept her nude drawings to herself and showed her sister only the landscapes, which were largely of the Smoky mountains in Appalachia. Sharice watched as Joyce picked out which ones she wanted to show, and eventually she handed over a stack of drawings. Sharice took a good amount of time to just sit there and look at the art.

In the morning, Mikey stood up quickly and fell over thusly. He still had not grown back his leg, and yet his habit would not subsist. It was trained into his muscles like a beaten puppy.

Mikey had woken from his dream once more, remembering nothing other than seeing his leg once again attached. He saw it like a smooth newborn, growing faster than it knows. Then he

would wake up, giving his head a shake at the thought, and attempting to stand. Sometimes he would wake up enough by the time he stood that he could balance himself and keep from falling, but much of the time he would fall.

He fell onto his carpeted floor and skidded just a bit, scraping his side against it and causing irritation. He lifted himself back onto the bed, and then shimmied toward the chair which he now lived in. He transferred himself into the chair and began to move about the house.

He made himself breakfast on the stove. He used to make a lot more microwave foods, but when his mom is working he can't, the microwave is just too high for him to reach. He boiled a couple of eggs and had them with toast. It was easy and he didn't know how to make anything else. He ate them at the table, his mother already working hard and long hours just to be able to afford rent on their small house, veritably in the middle of nowhere.

His mom was asking him to either go to school or get a job. He figured he'd try and get a job before he went to school. The idea of going to college for anything other than playing football was always something that he despised as a child, but in his adulthood he had grown somewhat to accept that he would use his brain from now on to impress others. This was why he insisted on reading for 3 hours a day. He was quite slow at it, and he figured that he'd have to do a lot more of it no matter where he ended up working. Today, though, he counted the reading as being his yellow pages, as he called place after place, looking for an interview.

He found none. He was depressed by this and quit after 25 minutes. He had called 7 places in that time. His mother wanted him to do something real with his life and get himself out of this rut through the same means that she had when she was younger, shut up and keep working. But, he hadn't done much in nearly 7 years now, not since he was 17.

He decided he'd sit and read until he was meant to be picked up. He sat in the backyard with a sci-fi novel about founding diplomatic ties with a far away humanoid species. The December wind washed over him and cleaned his bones via freezing, him sitting there in 45 degree weather with nothing more than his tighty-whitys and a thin robe. He was meant to be

picked up either by Jenine or Neziz in the next few hours to go and see their new apartment. Since they'd moved out, he had mostly only gotten to hang out with Joyce, which he didn't mind. He saw Joyce as intelligent, he respected her, and although she was younger than him, he admired her, and what she was able to do. He figured that he could've been like her if he'd never played football in high school.

His hair stood on end as he continued to sit and freeze.

Neziz was driving Mikey back over to their small house, there both inside and outside of Dallas, as it seems all things around Dallas are. The neighborhood reminded Mikey of his own, a poorer part of town where the only supermarket was 15 blocks away and needed to be reached by car, considering the lack of proper walking infrastructure. The house was painted white on the outside, but the paint was chipping and allowing the elements to begin eating away at the internal walls of the house, surely posed to destroy them in due time.

Jenine was sitting at the table with her head down, and when the door was knocked she tore herself away from it and stood herself up shakily. She walked to the door and let them in, Mikey needed to be pulled in backward over the step on the door so Neziz helped him. Mikey had a pack of cigarettes in his bag, but Neziz told him not to bring them out since she and Jenine were trying to quit and the last thing they needed was temptation. He didn't say anything about it in front of Jenine, she was getting it bad and was likely to act violently if she know it was being withheld. Pain does that to a person.

He could, however, bring out his little jar of weed, alongside his pipe. Jenine hadn't smoked from a pipe since she was 14, that's when she found a boyfriend who could sell or give her weed and she had enough always to roll nice fat joints to smoke. She was excited by this quite strongly, and remarked about her experience with pipes. While Mikey prepared the bowl, she told stories of all the pipes she had when she was a kid, one that was hello kitty, one that was

shaped like a dick, one that copied the style of an old school tobacco pipe, the kind with the hole in the front tip.

She sat down with them in the front room, which was both inside and outside, with a screen dividing them from the bugs which had already died by this time of year. Mikey lit the bowl, and it was passed quickly and greedily from hand to hand, with Mikey being the only one who'd been drugged whatsoever in the past few weeks. Withdrawal was given a break, and the girls felt the turkey warm as they dragged hit after hit out of the pipe. When it was empty, after only being passed around the group 3 times, Mikey made haste in packing a new bowl. He didn't have an unlimited amount of weed, but he wasn't addicted to it the way the girls were, and he felt that he should give them more so they can be satisfied, even if only for a little while.

"I don't know," Jenine said about her addiction, "I don't know what I'm gonna do about this."

"I guess maybe we just shouldn't have gotten mixed up in it," Mikey said.

"No," Jenine said, "I don't think so. It wasn't getting mixed up in it. I think it's just about having, like, a healthy relationship with these things. Like, how people drink socially and never alone, they never even want to drink when they're alone. How does that work?"

"I don't think it's true. I don't think I should've introduced you to drugs," Neziz said, "I didn't really know what I was doing, I was only 14 then. It was so damaging, so painful for years."

"I don't regret it," Jenine replied, "It was the best time of my life, in highschool."

"That's sad," Mikey said.

"Oh yeah, and what about you, you didn't like it?" Jenine asked Mikey.

"No, actually. I thought I did, but looking back, no fucking way. It was hell. I was travelling all the time for sports, always worrying about how people thought of me, always freaking about going into college for football, and then professional. It was too much stress for a

teenager to have to think about. I had to worry about when I was gonna start making money from it so my mom could afford a better house. It was hell."

The girls passed the pipe among themselves and stopped arguing with Mikey. Neziz was glad he had said it, she never would've been able to.

Joyce started going to a program at the YMCA that involved her riding a stationary bike in time with an instructor. She did this every tuesday and thursday from 2:30 to 4 p.m. She'd done so, now, for 3 weeks. The YMCA, though, was about to close for the holiday, for 4 days. She felt an internal pain at the idea of breaking this new routine, as she felt she was moments away from making some actual friends who shared a common interest with her. To her, this was the closest thing to recreating what she wanted to do all throughout highschool.

As the class finished, she took to the shower and basked until she came out steaming like a cooked lobster. She talked to someone else in the lockerroom, but they didn't seem up much for conversation. Plus, Joyce didn't know if they were 20 or 30, so she was scared about trying to make a friend with someone much older than her.

She was picked up by her mother, in her silver Cadallac SUV, with all the stickers peeled off. There she was subject to her main stressor in life.

"So what do you think you're gonna do next semester? You going to school or what?" her mother berated her as if she were a child, and she shrunk like one.

"I don't know, mom, I'm still thinking about it," she replied.

"I don't know, Joyce," Ariel said, "I thought maybe getting out and doing this class, you'd meet some other students and get some idea of what you want to do, but I don't know anymore. Maybe I should just enroll you in the community college, the one over in Dallas, what do they call it?"

"Mom, I don't wanna go to community college. Don't enroll me in community college, I'm not paying for that."

“No, it’s fine, I’ll pay for it, or I’ll get your dad to pay for it. At least one kid will get into college that way.”

“Mom,” Joyce said, taking a pause and enforcing the dramatics in her voice, “I will figure it out, but I need time, and I don’t know what I’ll do next semester, so I might just get a job or something.”

Ariel took a deep breath in, and tried to calm her hands shaking. “You are going to college, Joyce, and there’s nothing else to say about it. I am not fighting you on this. You can either go to college or you can move out like your sisters if you wanna just ‘get a job’. I need someone I can focus in on and devote my attention to so they can be successful. You’re 18 now, and if you don’t go to school, you’re just dead attention, and I need to get rid of my dead attention. You make your decision by the end of late enrollment, that’s the time you got. After that, you’re either in or out. You can go play housekeep for your older sisters or whatever the fuck you want.”

Joyce looked down at her feet. She knew there was nothing she could do to change her mind. She also know the end of late registration for Dallas College. January 6. They were 4 blocks from the house, about 2 miles.

Sharon was desperate to get out of the house. Seeing Sharice and Joyce hang out more often filled her with jealousy. She wanted to visit her other sisters in the city. She romanticized an apartment downtown, in some highrise, where you’re far enough from the ground that you don’t hear the traffic, and where you can open the window and look straight down on the street, night or day. She called her mom and asked if she could visit, but she said that Sharon was still too young to go out without someone going with her, and that she didn’t trust Uber to get her there safe. Sharon pouted, and sat in the smoking room, picking out a cigarette from a pack and smoking it.

Mikey went with Joyce to a bookstore. He had fresh, clean clothes, a washed, cleaned up look, and sharply combed hair which flew aboke his head like ravens escaping a bullet. The store was used books stacked high and sold by the weight, either 25c each or $2 a pound. Mikey was telling her a story about a man ordering riverwater from a bar and drinking it until he died, but he said he couldn't remember where he'd heard it from. The employee at the store was overhearing them, but wasn't interested in speaking to them while they were there, they were reading something utopian about John Brown and weren't interested in removing their nose from it.

The towers of books were up in a way that you could knock down the entire store with a well placed and thought out shove. Mikey maneuvered his chair expertly around the thin halls between the books. There was a wall in the back that was for christian reading groups. There were entire box sets of group devotionals and books for sermon ideas and such, which would be read verbatim for batist and catholic preachers to lead around their sheep.

Mikey found a section that was all fantasy dime novels from the 60s and 70s, the kind that were sold in supermarkets and gas stations with pulp fiction covers to entice children to bug their parents to buy it. There was one with a man fighting a dragon while wearing some sort of sci-fi headgear, goggles that showed green on the lenses to let you know that the person wearing them was getting computer assisted information. The dragon was spewing some sort of green fire, full of nickel salts, and wrapped its tail around the hero.

Joyce found a stack that had political books. There were books which were joint disciplines, talking about the cross-section of Marx, Hegel, and Nietze, and original works, she found a copy of Smith's "Wealth of Nations" and Rand's "Atlas Shrugged". She was somewhat interested in these, but not entirely. She found the section to be full of unneccessary words, the kinds that she would've memorized only for school and never used in an actual conversation.

The two met, then, at the cook books, considering getting the Better Homes cook book, which each of them recognized from their childhoods and understood as iconic. Joyce sprung

for a copy of a book she'd heard of many times but never read, a short book about someone being locked up with ugly wallpaper until they go insane. Mikey decided to get one of the fantasy books he'd seen, he tried to make sure he got the first in a series.

The two, then, left the store having spent 50c, and sought toward their car to return to Ariel's house.

Sharice was feeling pretty lonely, in this large, quiet house. Her mother was still in her room, practicing her endless cycle of feeling sorry for herself. Sharon, by this point, was so unequivocally jealous of Sharice and Joyce's blossoming friendship that she now refused to speak to Sharice and was making plans to move out of her mother's house and in with her sisters in the city, although her sisters would not have any idea that she was making these plans.

Sharice got a copy of a short story that Joyce had found at a used books store and read, and she thought it was very good. She began to read this book, and although at first it was hard to hold her attention, she found herself reading it all in one sitting, making fun of herself when she'd try to stop reading, thinking "what, you can't handle reading 30 pages in one go? What are you, some kinda idiot?"

She finished it and put it down and leaned back against the wall that aligned the head of her bed. She was grateful that she'd stayed in her room and let Sharon handle Neziz's old room on her own. She had, now, so much space in her room that she could use it even to smoke, without her sister's bed sitting and blocking the lock to the window. She liked to keep the window open during the days now, so she could puff a pipe every time she wanted to without having to make so much noise opening it. She also liked the winter winds being let in, chilling her in ways that she was not used to.

She was closing the window then, when Sharon entered her room without knocking. "Why do you need to make so much goddamn noise right now?"

Sharice looked at her, knowing that she wasn't making that much noise, and knowing that Sharon must have been waiting there for her to make any noise so she could come in and chew Sharice out. She thought about how someone would handle this if they were an asshole, and then she tried not to do that. "Sorry," she said.

Sharon was prepared for this line, "sorry, what? Sorry because, uh, you're a bitch," Sharon closed the door. She had forgotten her preparations and panicked, and now she was humiliated with nothing more than a word from her adversary.

Sharice finished closing her window and shut the blinds to block the street light from beaming on her as she tried to sleep. It was only 6:30 but the night was already ever present and the cold air bit at exposed ankles like a small, bastard dog.

Jenine was finally starting to get over her withdrawal. She couldn't do cold turkey, and Neziz knew that, so Neziz fed her nicorette gum any time that she asked for it. The money was starting to come in a bit more as she got more hours (she was now working overtime 8 hrs a week), and if Jenine felt good enough then she could work and the income would double for their household.

But as Jenine began to come out of her withdrawal, she had only one thing on her mind; that redheaded Bingley boy. She dreamt of him many times in her feverish state, she thought of his hair and of his freckles and of the way that he spoke, although she'd never spoken to him. She told Neziz that she wanted to see him. Neziz asked her about her health, and how she was feeling, but Jenine couldn't care less about it, she wanted to know about the Bingleys.

She was more lively than she'd been since leaving her mother's house, with a bounce to her falls and a giggle when she'd bump into the countertops and the walls of this house which she barely recognized. She stumbled around as her sister followed her, concerned as always and picking up the broken pieces of her stupor. As Jenine finally abandoned to sit, she drew a long breath from her nose and turned her head, gleaming, toward her sister. "That fucking Bingley kid. I've been dreaming about him for weeks."

“Weeks? Jenine, is that what you’ve been muttering about in your bed?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. I want to see that Bingley kid again.”

Neziz sat down at the table with her sister. She said, “let me get you something to drink, you’re thirsty, right?”

“No, I’m not,” Jenine said. She dribbled her fingers on the table and felt the taps quiver through her arms. “Do we have any alcohol?”

“No. Obviously. Why would we keep alcohol around?”

“I want a drink, I just, I don’t know. I wanna get him out of my head for a bit.”

Neziz grabbed her sister’s hand, “look, I know this is hard, but we’re living that sober lifestyle honey. Maybe you don’t need him out of your head. Maybe he can be some kind of motivator.”

Jenine sat still for a moment. She started crying, “I feel so stupid, I feel like I’m in middle school again, pining after this fucking kid.”

“Did you talk to him at that party?”

“No, I got too nervous, I couldn’t, I was too high anyway, I would’ve just looked like a fucking slut and an idiot.”

Neziz didn’t touch her as she sobbed. Jenine wasn’t one for the whole physical affection. She preferred to be left alone. “I’ll make us some coffee, I got this grind from a health food store. It’s supposed to be Arabian, or was it arabica?”

Jenine cried, still, on the table, her eyes rolling and passing enough tears so as to be caught in a glass.

The coffee was produced into two small cups and brought to the table. Neziz put them down and drank hers as Jenine finished crying. Jenine lifted ehr head from the table and picked up the cup. “It’s arabica, Neziz, it’s a type of coffee bean.”

“Oh, well is it from Arabia then?”

“I don’t know,” she replied.

Joyce was sick with worry. She laid in her room, scared to move. Thrown out on the street like trash. Worse than trash, she figured, Trash, if you threw it out on the street, would get you in trouble. If she were thrown out, there would be no trouble. She was like sludge in the sewer, or, as she decided, the ice dumped out from the cooler after a day at the beach. Once the thing which saved the party, now used up and ready to be disposed of.

She was trying to read a book when there was a loud commotion downstairs. Ariel was screaming again, but it wasn't the hollow, sorrowed cries of her failures as a parent, these screams were angry and lucid and moving back and forth as if there were a great deal of running going on. And suddenly, she heard Sharon scream, and then a third male voice which she didn't recognize.

She feared the worst, and left her room with caution. As she walked to the staircase, slowly, she heard the argument taking place. "You hussy, what is wrong with you? And you, what, you're some pedophile?"

"He's not a pedophile, mom, he's my boyfriend!" Sharon screamed back at her.

"He's fucking 30!" Ariel yelled back.

Joyce got a good look at the action. Sharon was gripping the jacket of a man twice her size and twice her age, a black leather jacket with a motorcycle club's insignia scrawled over the arm. Sharon was wearing a small, pink leather jacket, which looked used, as though she was just another in a long line of women cursed to wear it.

"You're not gonna be some motorcycle gang's floozy, heard? You're a kid, you're my daughter, you're not gonna just throw your life away because you're feeling angsty."

"Jesus mom, quit saying that to me. I'm not a kid. I'm not," she gripped tighter on the jacket.

"And you. I don't know what the hell you think you're doing with my kid, but you give her back."

Joyce had noticed how silent the man was, but he spoke up again here, “I’m just trying to help your daughter find her home.”

“This is her home,” Ariel said.

Something in the man’s eyes glazed over, and he looked around the room, he looked back at Ariel, then down to Sharon on his arm, then back up at Ariel. He shook Sharon off the sleeve of his jacket and said to Ariel, “I can see that, ma’am, I was mistaken.” Sharon looked up at him, and fell to the floor dramatically, “Sharon, my mom never fought for me like this. She wants you, You don’t wanna get mixed up in this kind of business.”

Something in Ariel softened, but her demeanor didn’t change. She held the same front. The man left the way he came in.

“You go to your fucking room. I’m getting a deadbolt for it in the morning,” Ariel said, in a collected sort of way, she kept the anger out of it, though it was clearly just bursting to get out.

“Mom, I…”

“Get the fuck in your room before I kick your fucking teeth in. You do something like this again, and I’ll fucking kill you. Bringing a fucking 30 year old home, tell me something. What the fuck did you expect? Did you think fucking at *all*?”

Sharon held her tears and stood up. She ran up the stairs and straight past Joyce.

Joyce made eyecontact with her when she passed. Joyce could tell that it was adding only to her humiliation, but still she held the eyecontact for quite some time. She’d never gotten very close with Sharon. But there was something she saw in her, then, and it was a star, a drama star. Someone who danced smartly onto the stage and controlled it, who carried the narrative all the way, as if she believed it. She was considering telling her she should look into acting, then and there, but she knew it wouldn’t come across sincere.

Sharice was sitting in her room throughout the fighting downstairs. She was feeling excited about Christmas. She heard one door slam -- Sharon, she presumed -- then a door closing

normally, and another door slamming down the hall, who she knew was Ariel. She didn't care much about that. She was online, playing a game that let you pretend to be a different person and just go around and talk to other people. She was really just in a chatroom with a video interface, and she was enjoying it, talking to someone who said they were from Austin.

She got in an argument about politics in Texas and about Austin, with this person. They were wearing a skin, in the game, which made them look like a fox with the hair on their tail ever puffed. They talked in the chat. Sharice went by "Amethyst" and the stranger by "Jizibil":

Amethyst: Cruz isn't really that bad, is he? I mean, why else would he keep getting elected?

Jizibil: Yes, he's bad. He's really bad. Maybe you haven't heard of it yet, but that doesn't mean he's good.

Amethyst: Ok, but what makes you the authority.

Jizibil: Look, I do the protests, and the canvassing, I know, okay?

Amethyst: What protests do you do?

Jizibil: I'm not gonna tell that to a stranger over the internet. You're lucky I told you the city I'm in.

Amethyst: Look, I just don't know what's going on.

Jizibil: Well, maybe you should learn. Look, I'll send you some links, but I'm not gonna tell you what to think.

Sharice was pinged with articles from unionist and socialist websites, as well as some mainstream outlets which her father always said to be wary of. CNN and Vox and what have you. She figured she didn't need to follow dad's rules considering he was never around to enforce them.

Sharon called Eugene and asked if he could please pick her up and let her live with him for a while. She said she'd transfer schools since she didn't like anyone at her own highschool anyway, and she wouldn't eat too much.

He asked, "is your mother being a pain again?" and she replied, "yeah, she's, like, way too pissed at me."

He said he would pick her up later that night, that he would knock on the door, but then he said that he would need to call and make sure it's ok with her mother.

"Why the hell would you go and do a thing like that to me, Euge? I just told you I'm scared of her. How far are you from the house?"

"'Bout an hour, why?" Eugene replied.

"She's out buying a deadbolt to put on the other side of my door. She's gonna lock me in until the semester starts back up."

"Huh. What'd you do?"

"That don't matter, can you get me out of here or not? I'm packed already."

"Honey, I lied, I can be there in 10 minutes. I was just driving through Grapevine."

"Bastard," Sharon said, and she hung up. She went to the main room, by the front door, and waited to see his truck pull up.

Joyce saw the truck pull up to the gate outside her window. She saw someone get out and go up to the intercom at the wall. She recognized the truck as her dad's but she was extremely confused as to why he was there. The thought had never crossed her mind that any of them would choose to live with him, all the way out in Waco. But after a minute had passed, there was Sharon, running out, bag in hand, to her dad. She opened the gate with her remote, and stepped out to get in the truck. They were gone within seconds. Joyce saw it as a voluntary kidnapping.

She stood up and decided she'd wait in the kitchen to tell Ariel when she got home from Ross. It was about an hour before she showed up, with bags and bags of clothes. "Don't look, these are presents," she said, rushing upstairs.

Joyce lagged behind, unsure of how to tell Ariel the news. She walked up the stairs and stood by the doorway to her mom's room. Eventually, she said, "mom, Sharon went with dad today, I think she's gonna live with him."

Ariel stopped what she was doing. She put down the bags of clothes in her closet and she stood facing away from Joyce. She was silent there for some time. She, eventually, sat down, and sighed. "Just leave me alone for a bit. I thought I was having a good day but I guess not. I need to make a few phone calls."

"Ok," Joyce said. She left the room slowly and she felt fear for her sister. She knew that Ariel did too. She went to Sharice's room and found her crying on the bed. She had seen Sharon leave as well. She sat down next to her and put her hand on her head to comfort her. "She'll come back," she told Sharice, "she'll be alright and she'll come back."

Sharice sobbed as one might over a grave. There was no hope in calming her.

Sharon had two pairs of socks, a full bag of joints, a skirt, a pair of shorts, 4 pairs of underwear, and 2 shirts. She didn't pack any pants. She had not considered the time of year when she packed up to leave. She also lacked a jacket, any hats, and most critically, her phone. This was confiscated by her mother as part of her grounding, so she wasn't to blame, but in any case, she had no way of speaking to anyone outside her immediate vicinity.

Eugene smoked Marlboro Golds, which he enjoyed because of his love for the color. He smoked them most when he drove. He could put away half a pack on his way to work, assuming he felt like going into work that day. He was smoking then, with the windows all the way down and the wind and sun flooding in all at once as he drove the drive out to Longview. He moved to Longview after the divorce, but he had owned his home there for years already. He figured it

would increase in value, and while much of the city did appreciate in value throughout the 90s and 2000s, the neighborhood he had bought the house in was already at peak development when he had purchased it, and the value had tanked slowly over time.

The last time Sharon had seen Eugene was when Joyce was dying way back in May. She had mostly forgotten about the incident, considering how high she was that night. But she noted that he didn't show up when it was Jenine dying. He couldn't afford the drive for that. She wondered why it was that he had decided to drive out that day, whether it really was just because he was already near Grapevine.

As the two of them reached the freeway, where traffic was frozen as it normally is, Sharon realized that Eugene had barely talked since he picked her up, that the extent of conversation so far in the drive was an exchange of "hello"s and a quip about her mother. She figured he'd talk to her if he wanted to, but she was fine if he didn't feel like it.

As the stop and go of the long wide highway droned on, Eugene lost his nerve and spoke, something he felt he wasn't supposed to do because in marketing the first to speak would be the same one who loses the game. He asked, "how is life going overall, Joyce?"

She hung her mouth open, waiting for words to come out. Finally, she managed to say, "I don't think it's going very good."

"Why not?"

"Because I don't have any friends and I don't know how to make friends and Sharice doesn't talk to me since I yelled at her. And now no one talks to me. And I brought a guy home and mom got him to leave so easily and no one wants me anymore."

Eugene wished he hadn't asked. "I guess, uhm…"

Sharon sat there with her mouth open like she liked to and looked at him. He thought *why the hell is she showing me down her throat*.

"I guess I'm sorry," he said after waiting a couple of seconds in the silence and the rhythmic and constant bumping of the road.

The traffic started to pick up and Sharon closed her mouth. “Yeah, me too,” she said.

“So you’re not calling the cops or anything?” Neziz said to Ariel after being filled in on the situation.

“I can’t just call the cops, it’s not kidnapping,” Ariel replied, the microphone on her phone making her voice come out garbled and shitty on Neziz’s end, “she ran out of the house on her own free will, he didn’t even knock on the door.”

“Well there’s gotta be something you can do, isn’t there?” Neziz asked.

“Who says I even want to? Besides, ain’t there some law she gets to choose the parent she lives with at this age or something? That’s what I did back in Santa Fe, I ran away from my daddy and he couldn’t do shit about it.”

“Look,” Neziz said, “I don’t know the law, but you gotta save her. He’s a shithead, he’s gonna do something fucked to her and she’s gonna be fucked.”

“It’s not gonna be anything too bad. She’ll spend Christmas there, realize what a piece of shit he is, and be back by new years.”

“Now would you- hold on Jenine wants to talk to you.”

On Ariel’s end there was a shout and a lot of rustling and then Jenine was put on the phone.

“Are you fucking stupid?!” Jenine yelled into the phone, “are you actually not gonna learn your fucking lesson here? Holy shit. No wonder I got so fucked up if this is how you were raising me. I’m just glad I was high enough to forget it all.”

There was a lot more rustling and grunting on Ariel’s end and then Neziz was back on the phone.

“Sorry mom, she didn’t mean that, she’s just going through withdrawal, don’t pay any mind. Look, it’s gonna be ok, alright? Just give her a call once a day, I’ll do it too, then if she wants to leave I can go pick her up.”

“Neziz?” Ariel said, with tears trickling down her face.

“What is it, mom?”

“You’re the best one I ever had.”

There was an unsure stillness from time to time in the house. There were 2 days until Christmas. Ariel refused, outright, to acknowledge the fact that anything was happening, but only in front of Joyce and Sharice. She cried often in her room, louder than she intended to or thought that she was. In some ways Sharon leaving broke her more than anything she’d experienced before. Sharon was her baby for a long time, they were inseparable in the way that some parents and children are where Sharon might scream or cry whenever she was without her. This kept up until Sharon turned 7. Ariel didn’t believe in any diagnoses the doctors gave her, mostly because they’d change it up every doctor she saw. One would say ADHD, the next Autism, the next OCD, the next DVD, down the list for all of eternity. But she regretted deeply that decision after her divorce.

When she cried, it was because she thought of all the time that she lost in school, and how that’s meant Sharon was always behind, could never catch up. She could barely socialize with people her age, and she still screamed for mommy when hurt well into middleschool. Sharice started to talk to her more because Ariel told her to. And Jenine started giving Sharon weed before school to keep her calm in 8th grade. Sharice started smoking, then, alongside Sharon, despite her being 3 years younger, aged only 10 at the time.

Ariel blamed herself fully.

Sharice had a different perspective. To her, Sharon was going to die. That’s what she knew to be true, that’s what she had been told by her sisters when she was 5, when dad moved into an apartment in downtown Dallas and the state said he was only allowed supervised visits. She saw it that Sharon was running from her, that all of this started when Sharice stopped hanging out with her, when she got into her video games.

She saw it as an outcry against the treatment against her for the past few months, and a sort of protest against the way that things had been going in the house for a while. After this Sharice wondered if she was the main catalyst in Sharon leaving, and she figured that she probably was. She saw it as being pretty straight forward, really, that she would have been the main reason that Sharon ran away. Obviously she was the person who Sharon trusted the most, and she wass the one who Sharon wanted to hang out with, and by removing herself from the equation, she obviously drove her straight into the arms of their father.

Eugene did not care much about what was going on in the house where Sharon had left. He didn't, in many ways, spend too much time considering the consequences of any individual action. Something he learned when he was a hippy was that since all things are connected, the shitty things you do are all part of god's plan.

The two of them arrived in Longview after what seemed the most bland drive Sharon had ever been on. There weren't even oil fields or wind farms like when she'd go west with Jenine and Neziz, there was only farming in between cities, and in the cities there was only traffic and the same few businesses which always seemed to accompany the roads near the highway. And then cotton, corn, wheat, for miles. The occasional ranch or grain elevator. Then there was Longview, like a depressing, smaller version of Dallas, of Grapevine. Eugene took her to a large gated neighborhood with endless identical houses with 2 car garages and off yellow beige paint which singed her eyes in the bright white sun of the day.

She unpacked in what seemed like no time at all and moved into a guest bedroom that Eugene had transformed into his personal closet space for his endless stacks of sweatpants and slacks.

She blew up an inflatable bed and lied on it. It was cold and the sun was going down. Christmas was going to be in 2 days, and she had no idea what she would do.

Mikey woke up, Mikey stood up, Mikey fell down. Same as every other morning. He figured he probably wouldn't be able to get used to anything else. He figured he should call Joyce or Jenine and see if they wanted to hang out or do something since he'd been stuck inside for days. He checked his phone and it was dead. He hadn't plugged it in. He put it on the charger and went to make himself a sandwich. He ate in the kitchen and went back into his room to check his phone. There were 40 notifications from the night before. Most of them were from Neziz, a couple from Jenine, and 9 from Joyce, but the one that confused him was the one call from Sharon. It was the most recent one, at 3:45 a.m. She had left a voicemail. He decided to open it and see what she had sent.

She seemed to have been in some calm state, she said she wasn't in need of help, she wasn't in trouble. She said she was moving to Longview with her dad because Ariel had been so awful to her. She said that she wasn't going to call her "mom" anymore, and that she wasn't going home. She stopped talking after that for about 10 seconds, there were noises of the highway which cut through to Mikey's speaker and into his ear with ease. Then she said something really specific which he wasn't expecting to hear but which warmed him. She said, "I could use some help making decisions if you want to take the drive out with someone."

Mikey felt as if he were some kind of christlike figure at this point, which had become his goal since he was born again from the sparks and the mechanical grinding of the sliding train as it slicked itself past him at 20 miles per hour. He felt, then, like a new person.

Mikey put his phone down on the bed and got into his chair. He wheeled himself out from his room to the kitchen. His mom was only just returned from a night shift, and she was drinking coffee and smoking cigarettes with her hand held firmly to the grip of her mug.

"Howdy," Mikey said as we rolled to the coffee pot.

"Es nicht, und du?" she replied.

"I'm good, mom."

"That's good."

Mikey poured a cup of coffee. There wasn't any cow milk in the house anymore, Mikey's mom was violently lactose intolerant and had very little self control around dairy. She kept oat milk by the quart for coffee, but nothing else. Mikey used to go to Jenine's just so he could get a few slices of Kraft american.

"I read a few of your old books, I mean, the ones I could understand," Mikey said.

"Oh?" his mom replied, "und was? What did you think of my old books."

"They're cool. I don't know how much they still apply, but I like them."

"Ja," she said, looking down into her coffee, "I suppose Rosa Luxembourg isn't very useful in contemporary America, I suppose that's true, but you know. When I was young It was still tangible. You know, before my grandmother moved to the US, she lived in München, in Bavaria. That's where Luxembourg's revolution started, in Bavaria. At least, that's what she told us."

"Ja, ich habe gehört," Mikey replied.

His mom drank the rest of her coffee. "Off to bed with me, I've got 4 hours 'til I leave again."

"Goodnight, I might be going out to Longview soon, maybe today, I need to visit someone."

"Fine, but, maybe wait until after Christmas."

"I think they might need a visit before Christmas."

"Ach," his mom said, "why must you be so stubborn?"

"Same reason as you, I guess."

"Ach," she said again, and went into her room, sleeping quickly and soundly.

Mikey got on the phone with Neziz and tried to see if she'd give him a ride, but she was at work, she had just gotten there, actually. She said to call Jenine and see if she'd get a bus with him or something, so he did, but instead Jenine said that she'd drive him in Neziz's truck, that

they'd steal it since she walked to work. But Mikey would need to buy the gas, they really were quite poor altogether. So Jenine got in the truck on the phone and hung up as she drove off.

Jenine had been sat at home, calling classified ads and using various job application websites, for 4 days straight. Everyone was in "desperate need" for employees, and yet they never seemed to call back when she laid herself at their feet. She had no distractions from the constant headache suffered from lack of nicotine. She drove with her knuckles stretching and cracking as they gripped the wheel and steered. She arrived at Mikey's in Fort Worth, her window rolled down and the cold air flooding in and making the car crisp quite quickly. She got out and Mikey came out of the house before she could knock on the door. They were gone east to Longview faster than any route to a party. It was a 1 hour 30 minute drive, but they made it there in about 45 minutes. The truck guzzled so much gas that Mikey had to fill the tank both before departing and after arriving.

His hair had grown quite long since he decided to stop cutting it, and he had even decided he would start trying to take care of it, so it flowed in a way it didn't before. And in some ways he liked it more, but still it was thin at the top, and he feared that some day he would be balding like his father was.

Jenine gritted her teeth so hard in those days that she often feared that she would bite through one if she were to be troubled by an unexpected bump. She pulled up slowly as they neared her father's house. None of them had ever seen it, not since he left, they had never gone out to Longview to see where Eugene lived. But she wanted to, she wanted to talk to her sister, and she had a good few questions to yell at Eugene as well.

To Mikey, Eugene was just another person. There was no way that he could possibly understand, he hadn't gone through what they'd gone through, and he hadn't to forget the things they had to forget. But increasingly he began to understand, in some way, from the things that Jenine had cried about on the drive over, and from her incessant haste in driving across the

state. He picked up the idea that they had long suffered at the addictions of both of their parents, just until after Sharice was born. Then, Eugene chose to leave for a while, and a while became permanent with a phone call from Ariel, met with a voicemail, who described the hatred she felt, the permanence of that hatred, and the final line of "don't come back, you ugly bastard." Two weeks later she served him papers.

And here they were, on the street, in Longview, ready to go into Eugene's house and see what they find.

So Jenine parked the car and took out her phone. She texted Sharon, "we're out front", but didn't send it, she just closed the phone, got out of the truck, and pounded on the door. She completely neglected the fact that Mikey could not leave the truck without her assistance in getting his chair, since it was folded up on the other side of the car, and there was no space for him to bring it any closer to him.

She pounded 6 times and then waited. 5 seconds passed and she pounded again. Mikey noticed that the curtains moved for a second at the window by the door. Jenine pounded once more. Then she screamed, "Eugene you open this goddamn door!"

She charged back to the truck, got Mikey's chair out of the back, and helped him down off the truck and into it. He pushed himself up to the door and started knocking, "Eugene, we just wanna talk to Sharon. Let her come out."

There was a silence for a while. "She don't want to come out," Eugene said.

"She called us here, open up," Mikey said.

"She says she didn't ask for Jenine."

"Bullshit!" Jenine said.

"Look, she called me, let her out so we can talk."

They heard Sharon yell a bit inside, and then the locks on the door started opening up.

Neziz walked home for lunch and saw her truck missing. It was a terrifying concept, especially knowing what had happened earlier that day, the phone call she got, and the recommendation she made. She had no way of knowing what had happened, but she feared that Jenine was on the warpath with Mikey to Longview, probably threatening Eugene with some kind of legal trouble to try and force Shannon to come home. Neziz felt that she was fairly good at guessing what sort of drama was being stirred up amongst her family members at any given moment. She was always an observer, she thought. This time she felt like a fool, an idiot who let people walk all over her and take her things. So she popped Nicorette and sat on the couch, and waited patiently for her microwave to heat up her food.

In her mind's eye, she saw a painting that she saw quite often, one of a cicada with its wings furrowed and its face cut off completely, having been eaten by some sort of predator, perhaps a cat or a raccoon. She had seen it a million times before, she first saw it when she was 7, in a museum in Austin. She went back to the museum the next year, but it was gone by then. So she just had the picture in her mind, she didn't know the name of the painting or the name of the artist, and she couldn't even remember the size of it or the material used to make it. She thought of it often, she saw herself as the predator; she was capable of great evil, and she would have to quell herself from her violent tendencies. This time she was the cicada. She could feel her head ripped from her body by the teeth of an animal that was larger, more violent, and more perfect than her.

The microwave beeped and she jumped up to get her food. A bowl of soup, heated from a can 3 days ago, which she did not finish and had put in Tupperware. She considered if she should call around and spread the word, but she figured it would happen fast enough without her doing anything.

There was a bit of an identity crisis that came from no longer being a primary caretaker for her family. On one hand, she was free to do what she wanted, but on the other, she felt useless. She didn't have to take care of Jenine as much as she used to, and now the only people

she would take care of often were customers, who were often ungrateful or even angry at her for daring to help them. In some ways, it was similar to her helping her family, but there was always a limit, a line of respect where their abuse would end, where they would remember how helpful she had been throughout the years, and where they would thank her for being helpful now. This was not the same at work. At work, she was just another sow behind the counter, someone equally necessary and replaceable, who could be used, abused, and tossed to the side when finished. She was a whore who served pizza.

By the time she began to eat, the soup had gone cold again in the Tupperware container, and she felt disgusted by the substance which hit her lips. This combined with the sickness that mouth nicotine necessitated made her feel nauseated enough to vomit. And she did, into the toilet in the hallway which led only to her and her sister's room, the water heater, and the bathroom. She sat on the floor by the toilet and thought about how pointless it was to go back to work, but then she remembered the time and decided she just needed to get up and walk back. Before she left, she tried to punch a hole in the wall, but she must've hit a stud, for all that happened was bruising on her knuckles. She looked over to the Tupperware container which held her would-be lunch and shut the door behind her as she left.

She texted Mikey to tell him to make sure to fill the tank when they brought the truck back because she wouldn't be able to afford the gas herself. He replied a few hours later to tell her they were coming back.

Joyce had been a bit frantic, but she felt like she should be responsible and calm, and collected, especially as her mother was dealing with her own grief. A knock on the door downstairs went unanswered by everyone, so the key was turned and the door was opened, and in came Mikey, Jenine, and Neziz at about 6:45 p.m. They sat in the main room and didn't do much. Neziz went upstairs and knocked on Ariel's door. She said something Joyce couldn't hear, and then she left the room. Then there was a knock on her door. She went to the door and Neziz told her that they

were gonna all meet in the main room and talk about Sharon and what was going on with her. Then she left for Sharice's room.

Sharice did not come down, she had told Neziz "maybe". Joyce and Ariel were there. What became hard was explaining what had happened.

"We pull up, right, and Jenine gets out," Mikey started, "she storms up to the door and just pounds on it. I opened the door and I'm, like, waiting for her to get my chair out of the back, right."

"Yeah, and like I kept knocking and he didn't come to the door at all," Jenine continued.

"And so like, she started yelling for him to come to open up the door. And he said no, right. And she just keeps pounding and yelling and she gets more and more pissed off and he won't open up the door. So she came and got me."

"And right when I bring Mikey up, he starts talking again. He says she doesn't want to come out. And I'm like, so why the hell did I drive all the way out to Longview then?"

"Could you stop this running in circles and get to where you talk to her?" Ariel asked, exasperated at their slow and pointless story.

"Yeah, so she comes out for me, right, because I tell him she told me to come," Mikey said.

"And then she won't talk to us once she gets out there," Jenine continued, "and Eugene keeps the door open the whole time, just listening to what's going on, but she won't talk to us."

"And we try and get her to talk but she won't," Mikey said, "and we can see that she's just terrified, and after a few minutes, he calls for her to go back inside and she just does it."

Joyce couldn't believe the meek character they were painting of her sister, the one who had been so bold for seemingly forever, who was never afraid to say what she thought and to complain. So she said, "maybe we should call the cops."

“No,” Sharice said, from the top of the stairs. The group turned to look at her, and she began to walk down. “Tomorrow you take me to her. She’ll come back then. If you call the cops who knows what might happen. She wouldn’t talk to them anyways.”

“I don’t want you going there,” Ariel said.

“I don’t care. I need to. That’s my sister. I need to take care of her.”

Something in Neziz’s head rang like a bell on a bicycle. Ariel sat down on the couch and looked back and forth, “god, this couch is disgusting.”

“We need to deal with this soon,” Neziz said, “I’ll get a cover tomorrow, I’ll go out with you. We’ll all go, huh mom?”

Ariel started crying into her hands. She slumped over like she was dying and let out a loud sob. Then she charged herself upstairs and into her bedroom.

The rest of them agreed.

Jenine had gone into the bathroom and gotten an old stash out of the radiator there. She crushed up a pill on the cap of the pill bottle and put the white powder up to her nose. She moved quickly, before she could have time to regret it. Within moments she felt her mind go numb and her heart still. She lied on her back, covered by her thin blanket. She lied on the couch in the old smoking room and attempted to keep herself awake while the pills ate through her synapses and found their way through each and every neuron she still owned. As she felt the hairs on the back of her neck fall flat against her skin and the warmth of the heater eat through her bones, she knew fully well the feeling of her love. She was asleep before she had time to understand it.

In her dream she had a knife in her back. She was trying desperately to pull it out, but it was so squarely in her back in such a way that she would not be able to reach it no matter which way she reached at it. She felt her back grow ever longer and wider until she was sure that the knife must have been causing her to grow. She felt the iron seep slowly into her veins and cause

them to swell, pushing her muscles apart and causing a good deal of pain. She felt her bones be pushed apart from each other, her joints having a good deal more meat being put in between them and this meaning she had no chance to move them. She tried her hardest to make a fist, but there was something stopping her from engaging any of the motion in her hand and made her feel as if she were layered thick with tightly packed wet toilet paper.

She thought that it was the end, that she would surely die if she could not move. She wondered if Neziz would still take care of her if she went full circular. But she kept expanding, quicker and quicker than when it had started, but then suddenly, as she reached a critical mass, she felt the knife in her back pop out, and out poured pill after pill after pill, ground into powder, like a white waterfall endlessly spilling onto the ground.

Then fell her hair over her body, she hadn't realized it had been growing at the same rate, and the weight of it began to pull down on her neck and force her head into a series of painful contortions in order to keep itself straight up and pointed forward. But it was no use, and she quickly gave up and allowed her neck to sag her head straight forward, like a sack full of wet beans. She felt her muscles begin, one by one, to fail to support her weight, and her body began to slump painfully, and her bones would crack and mangle and force themselves further and further onto the ground. She could feel the shards of bone fill her with thousands of cuts. And still, the crushed pills flowed out of her, as though the floodgates had been opened and there was no longer a way to close them.

She felt her eyelids grow too heavy for her to keep them open, her eardrums burst under the pressure of her skull. And then she felt it stop. The pills flowed out, and she stopped growing.

She heard footsteps approach her. She couldn't turn her head to see who it was, but the walked slowly toward her, in this endless room of black marble, and eventually, painfully, they stopped before her.

She saw him there, when she opened her eyes just a squint. It was the Bingley boy, with his red hair and his pale skin, and he was naked. She saw that his pubes were in fact just as red as his head, as Neziz had told her, and he looked her down and stared at her. And then he said, “what an inconvenience.”

She awoke with a desperate need for change, and she dumped the rest of the pills which she had stashed away into the toilet.

Sharice had once again gotten on the phone with her new online friend. He was a union kid, in his freshman year of high school, from Chicago, he liked to be called Tommy. She hadn’t met anybody from Chicago before, and he excited her quite a bit.

“So yeah, he’s got her in his house now and she is like, too scared to come out or something,” she said.

“What are you gonna do?” he said.

“My family wants to call the cops,” she replied.

“The cops won’t really do anything. They might make it worse,” he said.

“Yeah I know, that’s what I told them.”

“Yeah.”

There was a bit of silence.

“What are you doing right now?” she asked him.

“I’m just writing an essay for my class.”

“What’s it about?”

“Pride and Prejudice.”

“I heard it’s boring.”

“It’s alright. It’s just outdated. Plus I don’t like romance much, but it’s very dramatic.”

“I couldn’t read it, I don’t think. I barely read as it is.”

“You should. Reading is important, it’s the best way to disseminate ideas in a complete way.”

“What do you like to read?”

“I read a lot of strange books, and political books. Like, sociology and stuff.”

“What’s sociology?”

“The study of societies. Not like, anthropology, I guess more like, the study of our current society.”

“Huh, never heard of it.”

She sat still and waited for him to respond but he didn’t, so she said, “I’ll let you go, since you’ve got work to do.”

“Yeah, have a good night if you can. Sorry I’m so distracted.”

“It’s fine,” she said, “It’s not like we’re dating or something.”

This time he went silent in a way that she knew meant he was uncomfortable.

“Let me know if you want to talk tomorrow, goodnight,” she blurted out.

“Yeah, goodnight.”

She felt like an idiot. She had never likes someone as much as she liked him. He was handsome in a way that the middle school boys weren’t, and he knew so much more than her, it was enticing. She felt her heart jump when her phone would vibrate. She felt like a girl in a romance movie. She took out a cigarette, lit it, puffed it a couple times, and then carefully put it out so she could smoke more another time. She had been operating off the same two packs of cigarettes which she had stashed when Jenine and Neziz were made to move out.

Her hands shook afterward. She didn’t like her new sober lifestyle, but there were positives. She had never been motivated to talk to boys like that before.

Sharon was in hell. She hadn’t remembered how awful Eugene could be when he was all alone with you. After Jenine and Mikey left, he began yelling at her about having contacted them. She

told him that she had just wanted to talk, but he said he didn't understand why she'd call him to pick her up and save her if she was scared of him. Now, she sat in an extra room which he kept a bed in for guests.

She thought about Sharice and Jenine and how much fun they used to have together going to parties. And she thought about the biker gang and what their parties had looked like. For a moment, she stole herself away into memory.

She had found them at a gas station. They were posted by their bikes, waiting for someone in the store.

"What are you boys doing out here all lonely?" she asked, the way she had seen sexy women do in movies.

"We're waiting for our friend, he's getting some more liquor for the party," one of them replied.

"Oh, well, that's fun. Where's the party?"

"It's a few miles out, by a little pond we rented," another replied, "A lot of people are there."

"Can I come?"

The men laughed a bit. One stood up and walked closer to her. "I don't know if you understand what kind of people are at this party, little girl."

"Oh, really?" she said, "people like you?"

"Yeah, mean people, like me," he said, pointing his thumb at his chest.

Something about the way he looked or the way he acted made her feel different than she normally did. "What's your name, mean man?"

He chuckled at her, "I'm called Bobby."

Bobby let her come after she told him she was 18. She said that she was trying to get away from home and find someone to love on for the rest of her life, and she said she was coming from a broken home, that her dad had died of a flu the year before and everything had

fallen apart, that she needed to be married as soon as possible. He wore an iron cross around his neck and covered tattoos which ran up his arms and legs with denim and leather. The MC they were in was called the “D-Cups”, there was a naked woman on the back of each member.

The rode fast and hard and far, taking up a full lane on the highway with each of them forming themselves in relation to Bobby in a sort of V shape.

Bobby pulled up in front of a trailer which had been hauled out special for the party, and she got off his motorcycle. She had never been on one, and she hated the noise it made as it drove, but still she stood up and accompanied Bobby in her Sketchers and black skirt.

Sharon became a bit frightful of the people at this party, many of them were well into their 50s and had great billowing beards and occasional facial scars. Tattoos littered their necks and faces, and made them look each more threatening than the last. She shook this feeling with the knowledge that she was there as a guest for Bobby, who she saw as her protectorate among the muck. She was drawn invariably to his jawline and lanky features. He was a man who cared, she thought.

He stepped up to the trailer and opened the door. Sharon followed closely, not saying anything. Behind Bobby was his friends, or his “posse” as they liked to be called, carrying 2 cases of beer and another of Jack Daniel’s. They plopped them hard against the floor when they came in, with a case of beer being left outside the door on the ground for people to start drinking immediately.

“Who the hell did you bring?” said an old man sitting in a reclined way, a pipe of mescaline lingering in his hand.

“Said her name was Sharon,” Bobby replied.

“Met her at the gas station, says she’s a runaway,” one of Bobby’s posse chimed.

“A runaway?” the old man said, “From the gas station? Boy are you fucking dumb? No, don’t answer that. I know what you’ll say.”

The old man stood up, walked to Sharon, and sized her up close. “How old are you, little girl?” he asked in a threatening way.

“I’m 18,” she said back, in a sort of quick way that made her seem like she was telling the truth.

“18,” he repeated back to her, “18 and you wanna run away to a biker gang? That’s it?”

Bobby pushed himself in between them, “she’s my guest, why don’t you lay off?”

The old man turned away and put his hands up in the air, “I’m just saying, boy. Runaways ain’t good for nothing. You might as well had brought a piece of trash from the side of the road home.”

“Shut it, you old shit,” Bobby said back. He stormed out, and Sharon followed him.

There was a fire burning in the middle of this sort of camp that they’d all made. He walked up to the side of it and she followed him.

“I apologize for his behavior,” Bobby said to her.

“It’s alright,” Sharon said back, lying. The back of her throat tickled like she was gonna cry, and she was wondering if she had made the right choice going with them. No choice now, she thought, just have to finish what I started.

Bobby said, “he’s just an old shit, thinks he knows everything. Don’t worry about him.”

Sharon just looked at the fire. They were burning furniture and plywood. She wondered where they got the furniture from.

She felt free enough, she thought. The sun was going down and the winds were growing still, and she was warmed by the fire enough that it didn’t matter she didn’t have a jacket. But Bobby seemed restless.

“Look, you wanna run away? How about you run away with me?” he asked her.

She just looked dumb back at him, like she didn’t hear what he said, so he said, “you know, like, you wanna get away from what you wanna get away from, and, you know, I don’t

think I wanna keep doing this. I'm thinking maybe, I lay down my colors and we go somewhere nice. A real city. Like New York."

She thought about that for a moment, "I guess, yea…"

"Bobby! We're going out, you're coming with. Get on the horse, boy," it was someone from his posse.

And just like that, Bobby was up, moving toward the motorcycle, acting like they hadn't been talking. Sharon followed him. Bobby started talking, "what the hell for?"

"For some fun, this is fucking drab, man."

Bobby got on his bike. Sharon was there, and she tried to get on, and Bobby said, "what the hell do you think you're doing?"

"I'm coming with you," she said.

"Why would you do that?"

"I wanna have some fun too."

Bobby looked at her with a squint, "you don't get what we're doing, do you?"

"Yes I do, and I wanna come," she said, plopping herself down.

"Whatever Bobby, let the little bitch come!" someone yelled from behind her. She cranked her head trying to see who it was to give them a nasty look, but she couldn't figure out which voice had yelled.

Then the bikes were going and she was holding onto Bobby again.

This time they rode into the city, deep into it, where there were a lot of people living in apartment buildings and stores littered and closed. They were near the A&M campus when they stopped up fast on someone.

He was a black man, walking alone, in the early hours of night, it couldn't have been past 9. One yelled at him, "hey there, boy, what you out here for?" and then he took off running. She didn't understand what was going on, but they were chasing him, then. He ran up and over a

fence and they all started ditching their bikes and chasing him a bit more. When they got to the fence, one of them pulled out a gun and fired down at him. 6 shots. One hit.

He was on the ground. They all hopped over the fence, Sharon too. And she saw him writhing on the ground, whispering something to himself. He had been shot in the leg. The men took turns kicking him in the ribs and flipping him around. Bobby too. Sharon stood and watched and did nothing. She felt the fear that one can only feel when something horrible is happening and there's nothing they can do to keep it from happening. Bobby picked him up off the ground and called him something that she wouldn't dare repeat, and stuck a knife into his neck. Then they were back over the fence, on the bikes, and off into the night, all of them, with Sharon too.

They stopped back at the same gas station and bought even more beer for the party. Sharon didn't shake, she didn't fear them anymore. It was like they were different people then than when they were in that alleyway.

She got Bobby alone at the gas station. "Bobby, look, I wanna go with you, but I need you to come with me to say goodbye to my mama. She's over in Grapevine, it's only a couple miles from here. Then I'll go with you."

Bobby thought it was an alright idea. They rode to Ariel's house fast alone, after Bobby told his friends he would be back in a bit after he got some alone time. In front of Ariel's she asked him. "What did that man do? Why did you kill him?"

Bobby stood up straight with his arms back, like he was a soldier reciting the pledge. "People like him are scum, Sharon, they tear apart our society, our nation. It might not be pretty, what we do, but it's necessary, you see? We're cleaning up Dallas, one darkie at a time."

She acted like she understood, but she felt like the meaning was lost on her.

That was all she cared to remember from that night. It was midnight, then, at Eugene's, and she felt the weight of her eyes crush into her skull and her brain and she closed them to numb it.

There was a scramble in Neziz's brain which was unrivaled by any amount of cutting and repurposing which she had already been through. She juggled, constantly, the idea that she was someone who people could rely on. She felt herself slip further from the person she was when she lived back at home.

There she lied, on the ground with a blanket under her and another over her, her room having been torn apart and painted since she had moved out. She felt her hair wash the ground like a pour of mop water, long and luminous. Her thumbs locked into each other in the same way they would when she was a child, making a butterfly for her sister. Something in her heart broke, and she saw herself as nothing more than incapable.

In the morning, Sharon had texted Mikey, Neziz, and Jenine to come and pick her up. She said Eugene was out doing some kind of work, but she didn't know what kind, and she didn't know how long. She texted Ariel too, but she just wrote "I'm sorry".

There was a lack of relief from this text, in fact, there was a fear for the very life of their sister. Neziz was in the truck quickly, calling her friend from work to cover her, and getting the cab heated up for everyone who'd be writing. It was only 6 a.m and the sun had not quite yet peaked over the horizon. Neziz was met by Mikey, Jenine, Sharice, and Joyce, with Ariel staying home so as not to commit some terrible crime against her ex-husband.

The drive was quiet and long, occasionally interspersed by a speeding car or a long line of semi-trucks. There was no radio, no talking. They were all exhausted, they were all feeling like shit. Jenine was still, slowly, coming down off her final withdrawal, and Mikey was dead asleep, having not been able to for far longer than the rest of them. In his head sang a song his mother used to sing him when he was little.

Joyce took the time to look at her phone, she was considering the choice of college or not. She would pay $1500 a semester to go to a community college, or $6000 a semester for A&M

Dallas. Neither was going to be easy. She considered what kinds of jobs she might be able to get. She figured that if she worked hard she could do most anything. She had spent years working at school and only school and she did not know anything other than what she had learned in school: pass classes, work hard, do everything. Something about that didn't seem like a career she wanted.

Eugene's looked far more dilapidated than Joyce was expecting. She had never seen it, she was too young when he left. The paint was peeled on the walls and the truck he had out front was rusted in spots. There was budweiser cans overflowing from his trash can, his garage was left wide open and with nothing to steal, and it looked as though things hadn't been cleaned.

Eugene opened the door this time. "Just fucking take her, I don't fucking want her."

Nobody spoke to him. Sharon was packed and in the guest room, Jenine went and got her. Eugene sat back down and kept drinking. He had a little hole carved out from cigarette ash and cans, he was watching reruns of an old country music show. His hair wept over the back of the chair in a sorry shaggy mess.

"When was the last time you left the house, Eugene," Neziz asked.

He didn't look up, but he said, "I leave the house, I'm fine. Got the money rolling in, more than you'll ever make."

Neziz thought about kicking him but she knew that even drunk he was stronger than any of them and possibly all of them at once.

They were back by nightfall.

A certain peace befell Ariel on the arrival of her family. She had polished a final glass of white wine and her head was twirling in place on the couch. She saw the headlights through the window and her heart skipped and her eyebrows raised and she lazily attempted to bring herself up off the couch but her body relented. She sat and heard the keys jangle at the door and in burst 6 people, one in a chair, and another a person she thought might be dead.

It was Christmas Eve. She closed her eyes and fell asleep.

It was Christmas and the house reamined undecorated and without noise. The house slept whole until 11 a.m, when Mikey woke up on the couch, turned, and tried to stand. He grunted when he fell, waking Neziz who was upright in a lounge chair with her eyes closed, as if she were only badly pretending to sleep. Mikey helped himself up as Neziz sat there, blinking at the ceiling light and adjusting to being awake.

Jenine woke up next to a violent coughing fit. From the top of the stairs, Joyce and Ariel were awoken as well, and them leaving their rooms woke up Sharon.

The house got breakfast at a Denny's. Afterward, they went to their house and opened some presents. Ariel had gotten everybody one present. The rest got only one other person a present, Mikey gave something to Neziz, Jenine to Joyce, Joyce to Sharice, Sharice to Jenine, and Neziz to Ariel. Sharon didn't get anyone a present, but Neziz gave her $40 cash in an envelope. Then, Jenine, Neziz, and Mikey left and Joyce, Sharon, Sharice, and Ariel retired to their rooms to be alone. The whole day, it seemed as though only a couple dozens of words were spoken, the most common being "eat" and "thank you".

Sharon insisted on calling it "New Year's Eve-Eve". To Joyce, it was only a few days from her being kicked out. Sharice was making bracelets in her room, listening to an album that she didn't really like, and trying to make Sharon feel like she should stay at home.

Joyce was lying in bed stagnant like a pool of rotting water. She could see herself being a hatching spot for thousands of baby mosquitos who would blossom out of her and explode with new life. Inevitably, she would find herself straying in this thought toward a book she had been reading.

It was about a man living in a fantastical world, who could live in the wood alone and fight for survival against the elements and the beasts that would chase him down and destroy his

home repeatedly. It was recommended to her by Mikey. It spoke to her in a sort of ideological way, she could see herself enjoying that sort of life, where she could live without worrying about going to school or getting a job, where she could have an eternal adventure until such a day when she was too old to withstand the excitement.

And then the thought of the date would kill her again. December 30th, only 1 week to decide, but she'd already made her decision. She knew she wasn't going to go to college, she knew that college would kill her, and she refused to die. She had some notion of moving in with Neziz and Jenine in the city, but she knew what that meant, get a job, work hard, and pay rent. She didn't want that either. She knew that Eugene would pay for her school but that didn't matter, she wasn't going to go, she despised the idea of going, and she knew that the things she wanted to know could not be taught by an adjunct professor who works simultaneously at 3 different colleges.

She read her book, it was quite thick and she was only near the beginning. She wondered what Neziz would say to do. Probably something that seems helpful but really just leaves you to figure it out yourself. Same for Mikey. At least they wanted to help. She didn't see why Jenine and Neziz got to live with Ariel 'til they were part way through their twenties, and she should, at the age of 18, be booted for not immediately going to college.

The book didn't stop her thinking. So she put it down. She thought about taking some sort of drug to slow her mind, but she decided that would be worse for her than anything. At least she could plead with Ariel, talk about how she's been clean and sober for months, if she gets caught eating oxycontin or smoking a joint, who knows what Ariel might do.

Sharice was desperate for weed, she hadn't smoked since she ran out 2 weeks ago, and she had scraped every scrap of resin out of the bowl of the pipe and all but injected it straight into her veins. She did research online as to whether or not snorting the ashes might do something, but she found nothing and decided against it. She began in some ways to despise Ariel, not just for

this, but also for driving her closest sister away from their home and into the arms of that bastard Eugene. She thought about talking to someone about it but she knew all she'd get was bullshit about being kind or generous to her mother, and to realize that she shouldn't be smoking so young anyway. But to her, she would be 13 next, essentially an adult and she ought to be treated as such.

The bracelet she was making was almost done. It used orange, yellow, blue, and black beads. It looked like shit. She threw it away and tried again.

Jenine woke up on New Year's Eve with a slightly different outlook on life. Somehow when you're high, it's much easier to decide to quit getting high. Now she hoped desperately for a pill or two to wash up out of the toilet, somehow untouched as if saved for her by God. But she could see nothing. The low amount of drugs she used meant that as her high was failing, she was in far less need of detox than she had been before. She just sat by the toilet, glancing in the bowl from time to time and seeing, still, nothing more than blue tinted water.

She felt herself a fiend. And she thought of that fucking Bingley boy. She decided a walk would do her wonders.

Neziz joined her, being cooped in the house with Ariel all night was keeping her tempted to drink more than the past month and a half of struggle and pain could possibly give her. They were at the end of the cul-de-sac, the sprawl of suburbia ate up the color in the air and made everything a uniform gray-tan. The slant of most every roof was shingled with bright reflective green and the gate which enclosed each space was exactly, unchangingly, the same.

The families who lived there were few and far between. Many of the homes were rental, the one Ariel lived in was owned by her, in her name. Many of the houses remained empty for 3 months out of the year, some of them hadn't been filled since Neziz was a little girl.

Jenine decided they'd walk a full route. That meant they would walk the full "block, which in their suburb meant that they'd walk the cul-de-sacs all the way to the corner, and then

those cul-de-sacs, and the next ones, and the next ones until they got back where they started. Altogether it was 2 miles. When they were young they could run it in 20 minutes. They set off in the afternoon.

"Remember Jane Erford? She used to live there," Jenine said as they passed the second cul-de-sac on their route.

"No, I don't," Neziz said.

"Yeah you do, remember, me and her were J and J. We were criminals, remember?"

"J and J. Huh. I thought that was Joyce and you."

"Well, yeah, but that was after. Me and Jane came up with it. Jane was my age. I guess that's why you don't remember her."

"Yeah, that makes sense. Remember when me and Yanis Vance got caught making out over there?" Neziz asked, pointing at a green electric box.

"Yanis Vance. What a dumb name. I can't believe you kissed him, not even now."

"Well, you know, he was cute. Kinda."

"Well you found cuter boys in highschool. At least mama never found out about Yanis. He was creepy too."

"Not really though."

"He was 16 kissing a little 13 year old girl, he was a creep. I'm glad they left."

Neziz thought more about Yanis, but she didn't say anything. Jenine was on a steamroll and she was riding it as far as it would take her. Neziz was pretty used to it, so she would just tune it out mostly.

"Anyway, I never liked that Yanis, and his sister was worse."

"He had a sister?"

"God, you never listen do you Neziz?"

Neziz grinned. She liked how Jenine would talk like she was in a sitcom.

When they were younger they watched shows on the Disney channel and knew all the words to all the songs in all the High School Musical movies. Jenine wanted to be Hannah Montana, Neziz wanted to be Raven. Jenine rarely thought about her former wishes, but Neziz never stopped thinking about it. She would still watch it alone at home.

"Did you ever find out about that Bingley boy?" Neziz asked as they turned the first corner.

"No, but I think about him a lot lately. I had a weird dream about him."

"Ooo, a little sex dream?"

"No, like, a weird dream."

"Well, what happened?"

"I don't know, but, well, I wanna see him I think. I think my brain wants me to be with him."

"That's fun."

Jenine saw herself bloated, exploding with filth.

The second of four corners was turned. The walk was halfway over, and Jenine wanted a cigarette.

"Do you ever think you should've gone to school?" Jenine asked.

"I still could," Neziz said, "apparently mom will house any of us if we go to school."

A cold wind blew up into their faces and made Neziz's cheeks stiff. Jenine walked with her mouth hanging open like she was in constant shock.

The walk turned silent for a while and they turned the third corner.

Jenine peered up the cul de sac and saw bright red hair. Her heart skipped 12 beats and she thought she might fall over and die there on the sidewalk. Then she ran home, Neziz following behind slowly, having never been a runner.

Joyce refused to leave bed other than to use the bathroom or to drink water. At times she refused, in kind, water or food for long periods of time. She was sick with worry. It was the worst sickness she'd felt in her life. And no less from the drinking, she had stolen a bottle of wine from her mother which was drank within a mere 2 days of its being acquired. She felt like she used to in middle school, scared of the future, not wanting winter break to end. She wished she wasn't going to be forced to move. But that was inevitable, she knew that. She just wished.

She cried often, in that room, on her bed or on the floor, or sitting in the windowsill, with the window nailed and painted shut with those thick metal bars, a constant reminder of who she used to want to be. She couldn't bring herself to read, to think, to watch something or listen to something. All she could do was sit and panic, a thought process taking place some 20 feet above her head which seemed to not involve her at all, but which screamed down from time to time to let her know she needed to keep on edge. Soon she wouldn't even have that. She'd have a couch at Jenine and Neziz's. She'd sleep when she wasn't working, and help pay rent, and be miserable, giving her days to Pizza Hut.

The night crawled in like an insect squeezing through a crack between a window and a wall and threatened her to die by suffocation. And so she couldn't breathe, in her panic, and she couldn't think, in her panic, and she couldn't read or distract herself, and it seemed to never end. But it would end. In only a few days, and she knew that, and she was terrified.

She knew it was coming but she never thought it would be so soon.

And so the night dragged its filthy body over the ground and the sky and painted the brightness of her room with the purples and blues which you can only see when you're young, and she cried to herself in a fit of pity.

Neziz and Jenine were crouched in a ditch they used to play in when they were younger. It was the same place that Neziz confessed the first crush that she ever had, when she was 12. Jimmy

Jennings. She seemed to be uncontrollably attracted to the most idiotic of names. Jenine had never divulged a single crush in her 22 years alive. Bingley was her first.

She'd learned his name was Charlie. He worked at the Home Depot on the east edge of Fort Worth and he was in his Junior year of college. All of these things were already known by Neziz, she divulged them readily, but she admitted that he was elusive considering the amount of money his parents owned. They figured that he wasn't much for the camera or taking advantage of his social standing. He was studying Economics.

He was dating someone, assuming his instagram told true tales. She was Penelope Crudite, a child of a real New York socialite who moved to Dallas to go to beauty school. She was 19. She was a blonde with fake lips and fake cheeks, and she dressed like she was a cowgirl for halloween. She loved the idea of living in Texas, she posted 10 stories a day about it.

Charlie considered himself a rock climber, a mathematician, and a stock trading genius. He spent his freshman year studying mathematics at New Mexico Tech, where he was on the climbing team and learned bouldering. He spent every day of the summer driving around New Mexico, Arizona, and Utah to climb and find more things to do that he hadn't tried before. Penelope wouldn't participate. She would return to New York for her summers. She saw herself as a princess, nothing more and nothing less. They'd been dating, Neziz said, since they were in sophomore year. Jenine was undeterred, if a bit intimidated.

Charlie had a long record of being a bastard. He often ditched from campus to visit family in Oklahoma and Louisiana. He would get drunk on bourbon street on Saturday and call in sick to his marketing course on monday. He would quite often find himself strapped for cash simply due to the requirements of his lifestyle, which he would replenish with a trust request, which only needed a few weeks to be processed.

This description sat on Jenine's skull with the lightness of a 5 pound dumbbell. Her heart was still pounding from her being so candid about what she was thinking, something that she used to always treat as if it were the ultimate possible weakness for a human being to exhibit.

Neziz saw a person faltering and swaying in the wind, she had her eyes on the ground. So she decided to show her how they could break them up. It was an idea she got from an old episode of a Disney Channel show. She would get close to him, and introduce him to Jenine. Then, she'd plant evidence on his girlfriend that made it look like she had been sleeping with someone else. Jenine could then slip in and become the new girl. She just had to make sure she didn't make the same mistakes as Miley Cyrus.

Jenine was not confident in the plan. She was familiar with what could happen if you trusted children's media to make real life decisions. She remembered jumping out her window like in Peter Pan and breaking an ankle. That hadn't happened to Neziz, so she didn't really know, Jenine figured, and so she might not be the best to listen to. She had her own plan anyway.

She would simply introduce herself, say that she'd seen him around, try and talk to him. She'd look him up on social media and try to talk to him over the summer, when his girlfriend would be back east. She was scared of this, but even more she was scared of the half baked, sitcom logic plan which Neziz had cooked up very quickly and without much thought. She figured at least if she got rejected she wouldn't have burned the bridge in the process. She knew how it would look to try and meddle in someone's love life to insert yourself into it.

Neziz was very much offended by the fact that Jenine didn't go with her idea. She felt that an improper amount of time had been put aside to consider it, and she hoped that Jenine would reconsider in the future. She had very few reasons not to: she didn't know him, the plan would probably work, and even if it didn't there wouldn't be a big backlash for it since she didn't know him. That was the big mistake that Miley made, she meddled in her *friend's* love life, which made him stop being her friend when she found out. There's hardly a punishment for someone who you didn't know in the first place deciding they're going to hate you. That's how Neziz saw it.

She said none of this. Instead, the two of them stood up, and Jenine put a piece of Nicorette in her mouth, chewed it about 5 or 6 times, and then packed it in her lip for time release. It was her last piece for the day. They had to ration them to save money.

Joyce was in a constant state of panic regarding the idea that they'd be kicked out of their house and forced to find a place to live amongst her sisters or Mikey or the streets. The streets scared her the most, but in general she found herself obsessed with the idea of living with Mikey. There was something about him, and the way that he had figured himself out, and how he knew what he wanted in life. It turned her on. She thought about living with him often. She figured she wouldn't have anyone to fight with to live with him. But she remembered that he lived with his mother. She'd be trading one house, living under a mother's rules, for someone else's mother.

She felt she needed advice but she knew she needed to be independent. She felt that independence did not involve being dependent on advice either, that the best advice would come from a constant rumination. But now it was midnight, and her rumination had not yielded anything more than an extra hate for herself and an understanding that no matter what she does, everyone involved will be disappointed in her. Everyone wants her to go to college. It's been what she said she wanted to be since she was 6. They'd ask her and she'd say, "a lifelong student" the way she'd seen in Harold and Maude. She said it because to an adult, hearing something like that gives them hope for the future, and then they praise the child and make them feel superior to their peers. But eventually she got sick of lying for praise. When she was 16 she started saying she didn't know, and by 17 she realized she didn't even have any ideas. At the same time she knew how unacceptable her answer was. She had learned that where her previous answer had lead to praise, her new answer meant she would be jeered at and thought of as a waste of time or a burnout. She figured that was why she started Adderall, as she stopped caring about school she found less and less motivation to do it unless she was high.

And now it was midnight and she lay on her back staring at the moonlight, broken up by the bars welded on the outside of her window. It made all the reds and pinks of her room turn that color of purple that you can only see when you're little, when your eyes aren't so stark from the bright summer sky which seemed to stay around for 6 months out of the year. She was glad she got to see it one more time, since she assumed it would be leaving her for good. She realized that what she really needed was a job.

Mikey was there New Years Eve having more than a bit to drink. He had been working on a honey wine since the start of summer, but since his mom's house had poor heating and there had been a freeze the wine was still heavily underdeveloped. Nonetheless he had 2 gallons of it, so he and Neziz and Ariel were drinking it from the auto siphon like a boxed wine. Jenine swore off anything, even for New Years, so she bought a bottle of sparkling white grape juice for her to pop open and have with Sharon and Sharice and Joyce, since Ariel wouldn't let any of them drink anyways.

Mikey had gotten into making wine when he realized how expensive alcohol was when he added it all up. Besides he knew a guy from high school whose parents had a honey farm and had always insisted on giving friends and family first picks for free, the most choice, unfiltered and raw honey that could come out of the Dallas/Fort Worth area. So he decided on honey wine, mead, because he could make it for nearly free after the start-up cost. It was $120 for the bottles, airlocks, and auto siphon, and another $20 for the hydrometer and the wine yeast.

This party was the payoff of 2 months of work on Mikey's part and he aimed to drink it all on that night. He hadn't been bad lately and he figured it'd be good to loosen up. So they drank in the kitchen the way they did when Joyce was in the hospital and the way they did when Ariel first left Eugene.

Sharon lied on the floor of the smoking room with a cigarette in her mouth. Tonight was a special night, according to her mom, and the smoking room, or as she called it "the basement",

was not going to be under monitor. She smiled when she told Sharon and Sharice and Joyce, a smile that told them she was saying it against her own will. Jenine wasn't smoking, she couldn't be in the smoking room, not since she relapsed.

Sharon was thinking about Bobby again. She thought about his face. He had stark gothic features, a neck tattoo of the iron cross, his ears were small and flat against shit head, and there was a cigarette burn scar just where you'd expect a mole to be. She couldn't get him out of her head. She didn't get why. But when she thought of him she wanted to smoke. So she was smoking and Sharice was smoking with her and Joyce refused to even try a cigarette.

Joyce didn't know what she was gonna do. She was considering a loophole, just sign up for one class and call that going to college, but she knew it wouldn't fly.

It was 8 then, 4 to midnight, and the energy in the house was all off. There was a slow remorseful spirit that sat in every room and filled their ears with regret for each thing which had happened in their entire lives. Everyone but Sharice. She was on her phone, she was texting a boy in Chicago who she was head over heels in love with and who refused to answer her endless stream of messages. Occasionally, meaning about once a day, he would reply half heartedly and then send her a few memes he screenshotted from reddit. To her it was love, to him it was praxis.

Dragging the night along was a Madonna CD on repeat, playing out of the soundsystem in the living room quite loudly. Jenine could hear it from upstairs in Sharon's room. She was sleeping there that night since it used to be her and Neziz's room, really. She couldn't be around any of it. She looked at her phone and let the air come in the window. She felt like the black paint in the room never really dried and it was constantly letting out these fumes that simply filled the room and her lungs and everything about everything in this entire house. So the window was open and the fan was on high and she was breathing with her head out the window, trying to get more oxygen and never getting enough.

Sharice was watching the Cartoon Network marathon that was taking place for the new year out of the corner of her eye, lying on her back and listening to Sharon's breathing. Her Chicago obsession was subsided by the fact that he hadn't responded to any of her texts for the past 4 hours. Sharon was contemplating the point of having another year where all she does is stupid bullshit, and she was counting the seconds until midnight so she could start on the long and painful process of doing that stupid bullshit as if she wanted to.

Sharice was anxious at the touch of her phone, fearful, almost, at the idea of receiving a text back from him. So she was having a cigarette and trying to forget about how bad it tasted while her mind endlessly drifted toward Chicago. She imagined a place where she would be able to see others with little to no effort, somewhere where people just talked to each other for the hell of it. She thought she would very much enjoy living in such a place, even when she heard the stories from Tommy about large scale gunfights eating up entire city blocks and forcing people to cower in their homes. She thought *who cares? So what if I die? At least something will happen*. She felt herself a very stoic person for having such a thought.

The phone buzzed and Sharice picked it up immediately. A game she hadn't played in years was inviting her back. She didn't go for it, decided she wanted to keep up the streak of not playing. She put the phone down and looked at Sharon. She was slumped over like she didn't know the first thing about posture, despite the classes they had to take when they were young. "You're not supposed to sit like that," she said.

Sharon looked up at her and corrected her posture, and then she squinted, and grunted, and she said, "shut up, quit, like, telling me what to do. You're not my mom."

Sharice snarled, "I'm just saying you're gonna mess up your back. Quit acting like a little kid."

Sharon looked at Sharice and she was crushed. She never expected such an opinion from her closest sister's lips. She pressed her lips together and stood up. She stormed out the way

she'd seen on TV. Sharice got a text. She looked at her phone and was displeased with the contents of the message.

"I don't want you to talk to me anymore like you're my girlfriend or something," Tommy sent her. "You text me like all the time and I'm sick of my phone blowing up over a 12 year old."

Sharon wished she'd gotten to run off with Bobby. She figured he would be nicer to her.

Mikey finished the last glass of his mead.

Jenine paced around at the opening of the street to the Bingleys' house. The night was drawing in, and the party they were throwing was nearly over. There were lights beaming out the windows and cutting through the smoke of the bonfire. Jenine was scared about what she'd do there. But she could see him again.

So she rubbed some dirt into her hands and wiped it all off against one another and marched. Neziz wasn't with her, she said she didn't want the temptation. So she marched and marched up the cul-de-sac road toward that lit up house at the very end of it.

Something about New Years made Jenine anxious. She felt like she was supposed to have a crazy party night, but her recent fears and vomiting would tell her that she should avoid that. She felt like she wouldn't be able to stop herself. She thought about losing herself and making a scene, declaring some undying love to a boy she had never spoken to before. She thought about inviting Mikey until he showed up with a *fucking gallon of wine*. She could beat him for that. And she could beat Neziz for sticking around to drink it.

But she wouldn't, she wouldn't dare. She was on the sidewalk in front of the Bingley house, stopped dead in her tracks, on the brink of panic and desperately wanting a drug to make her feel OK. But she froze and there was nothing to be done about it. The house was loud. She heard it from up the street. From what she knew, the whole Bingley family lived there, including their grandparents and aunts and uncles. It was a veritable mansion. And while their parents

drank in Cancun all winter, the Bingley brothers were throwing a party to remind themselves what it was like in High School.

She felt like she was going to die when her foot hit the ground, but the next fell and the next fell and soon she was walking up to the front door and letting herself in. The lights were nothing new, the same purples and blues and reds she'd seen at so many parties before to try and make the pure white walls of the house look a little more interesting. There were people smoking out of a bong in the front room, there were bottles upon bottles overflowing the bar near the kitchen, there was Jenine, looking bewildered in her own element. She wanted a pill. She moved through the party in her learned fluidity, weaving the dancers to find the standers and then the circles and the lines. The longest line was for the bathroom, it was near impenetrable, and the second longest seemed to lead outside. She got in this line.

The backyard was like a second venue. The grass was long, on the brink of overgrown, and it flowed like water over the ground painting a vibrant green, stifled by the light of the moon. A pool had a few users, 6 if her count was right, with a hot tub turned brown from the amount of beer that had been spilled into it. Not to mention the liquor bottles which Jenine expertly maneuvered over and around, which would clink against each other as people moved. There was a small treeline which surrounded the fence in which people were sneaking cocaine or else having awkward and unenjoyable sex. The Bingleys stood out in the crowd, their bright red hair popping in the little light that was visible. Jenine wanted a pill.

She saw him hanging around a grill. He was cooking hamburgers. He was the third in shift, and the hamburgers were slowing down along with the orders. And again, Jenine found herself stuck in place like a doe, waiting for something to tip her off so she could run. But nothing would come. She would stare for a moment and look away. The other Bingleys were lazed on the grass, 2 asleep and the rest smoking. A couple of them looked as old as Sharice, but Jenine felt like they could drink a lot more than her. She thought about the bottles and how much better she would feel with one in her grip, she thought about the taste of vodka, and she

shook her head as if she were in a conversation. She needed to stay strong. He was there, he would see her lose control.

She made an effort not to beeline to him. She walked in a sort of zigzagging pattern across the lawn over and over again to make sure that he wouldn't realize she was walking up to him. Not that it mattered, he was fixated on the burgers, the drip of grease and the expertise of flipping. Jenine felt like she could see into his mind, and that all that was present was a picture of a cheeseburger with the word "hungry" written on it. She figured he wanted a break based on the sweat which formed on his forehead. So she came up slow, like she was approaching a feral dog, and tried her best not to look at him.

"I've heard of you," he said. "You're Jenine Bennett."

She acted like she didn't know he was talking to her. Her head lazed toward him in an expert calculation to express that she was cute but still drugged. It used to be that she could just act cute, but she knew that he would want someone who was a bit drugged out, so she changed herself in the moment. "Oh, yeah," Jenine said, "that's me."

"I'm Cyr," he said.

"Yeah," Jenine said, "I heard."

"I think your sister goes to school with my brother."

"Oh yeah? Which one?"

"I think her name was Clarice?"

"Sharice, yeah."

"Yeah, he said that she always comes in smelling like pot."

"Yeah, she likes the weed. Not the best look for an 8th grader I guess."

"Yeah, yeah that's true. We try not to give Skylar any weed. Justin started smoking when he was really young and it kinda messed him up."

"Yeah. I think she's cut back."

"Yeah. Well, it was great meeting you Jenine. I gotta get back to the burgers."

“Oh, yeah,” Jenine said, “well, if you wanna hang out sometime, I’m usually over at the place on Burgundy.”

“Yeah, I’ll see.”

Then he stopped looking anywhere near her. He became fixated on the assembly of the burgers, on the cheese melting into the burgers and the transfer to the buns. It was like he was a megalomaniac, focused only on the burgers and nothing else.

Jenine waddled off. That was her first big chance to talk to him, and she knew that there was no way that she had done it correctly. She shouldn’t have talked about Sharice and her weed habit. She should’ve kept it quiet. And she should’ve asked about him. Or maybe she shouldn’t even have come in the first place. It seemed like he was annoyed simply by the fact she was there.

At some point Jenine picked up a bottle of tequila someone left out on a patio table. She thought about counting how many people were at the party. Then she started drinking.

Mikey’s mom would often dance in the kitchen, drinking dark beers and listening to an East German death metal band called “ Blutengel " who existed from 1982 to the destruction of the Berlin wall.

She listened to them a lot since she was heavily interested in East Germany. Her mother was a second generation immigrant, with her grandmother being from Wismar. When Mikey’s mom, Rosa, was growing up, Wismar was like an impossible land across the world, blocked by a wall and guards and politicians who wanted to keep her from going to her homeland. After being radicalized she would often drink to the hopeless downfall of capitalism and to the continued prosperity of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. But that was the thing, when she was 17 the wall fell, and she got to go to Wismar, and it was a nice town for sure but she never really thought she’d get to see it without paying a bunch of money and being approved by the government. But she never thought about it after that. She stayed a radical, but she realized that

the USSR was soon for a fall, and she started wondering if the bad things people said about them could be true.

Blutengel was a return to how she felt when she was young, when wanting to help people meant participating in protests and riots, throwing apple sauce on police visors and trashing department stores across the vast landscape of Texas. But she stopped when she landed a sentence. Repeat arrests means more time, and she knew herself too quick to anger in a situation which involved swine. She was sentenced to 90 days, serving 60, out before the Grammys.

She spent some time overseas. She had wealthy family in Brandenburg. She felt that an escape to the German countryside would breathe some new life into her.

It was there that she met Josuf, a wonky boy of hippy parents who didn't mind that she sounded like his grandmother. He could always speak with her in English if he got sick of hearing it. His family lived in a farmhouse with 12 acres which they used for cattle. She would visit and she wouldn't mind that it smelled like shit. He would visit her at her Aunt's vegetable patch, where she rode out her retirement. She lived in a largish house which crept with vines which were seemingly perfectly groomed at all times, regardless of Katrin's health or ability to climb up the house to trim them.

They would go out drinking in the city and sit by the river and talk about their lives and what they wanted. She got a taste for dark beer because he swore by its "healing properties", especially when it is drinken particularly quickly. She would flirt with him openly and he would remain oblivious to her.

She moved back to America in the fall and started university. She couldn't be away from her mother. Not in her old age and declining health.

When she died in the winter of 97, Rosa felt it pretty hard. She was only 61, but with her cancer things seemed to only get worse. She cried for a long time over her. Her mother was an inspiration to her. She went to nursing school. She wanted to help people the way she had

helped her mom. She imagined if her mother had been in the hospital, alone, with no one around to talk to her or distract her.

Then came Michael Kennedy. A man who reminded her very much of her love in Brandenburg. In some ways. In others, he was insufferable. He loved beer, but only the light beers, the cheap, American beers. She saw herself as a woman of established taste, who enjoyed a good, dark, German beer. She cringed when he would order at a steakhouse or anywhere fancy, always the same, always Miller Lite. If they said, “no,” then he’d ask for Bud Light. If they persist, he asks for Coors Lite. Lite Lite Lite. All day sometimes.

But then came Michael Kennedy Jr, better known as Mikey. And she loved Mikey. She held him in her arms for what seemed like forever. He was pampered by his mother, certainly, but Michael Kennedy would not partake in such forms of child rearing. He knew the truth of the whip and her crack. And he shared this truth with his son.

Mikey was walking at 10 months, running at a year and 7 months, and when he turned 5 he was put in a little league for football. Mikey would run the ball past the other kids just like his dad taught him, and his dad would smile and laugh and be happy afterward. He won his first tournament the next year, when he got put on what his dad called “the good team”.

Things worked out that way for a while. Katrin stayed because of the financial security of two incomes, and Michael would stay to see his son win and to help him become rich and famous. It was a good dream, for Mikey anyway, but he changed a lot when his ankle gave out.

With Michael gone, Mikey and his mom moved to a worse neighborhood that had cheaper rent, and she sold the car and biked a 1 hour commute to the hospital every morning for work.

Then came Joyce.

July fourth was the first time that Joyce had seen her mother since she was kicked out on the eighth of January. It really was a heartbreaking time for her. Mikey and Katrin had been a great comfort to her.

They all rode the bus to a stop only about a 20 minute walk from Ariel's house. On the walk over, they saw a lot of kids out with their parents, sticking snakes and sparklers in anthills and lighting the ants aflame, or getting scolded and told they're gonna burn the house down if they put it so close to that big old tree, I mean just look at how dry it is, we ought to cut it down sooner than later. A colored smoke bomb would whizz down the street staining the asphalt and letting everyone know what day it was. Katrin was not comfortable going to Ariel's house. If she knew one thing about the Bennets, it was that they had more drama in a week than most families might in a year.

The walk up Burgundy Circle was surreal in a way. Neziz's truck was sitting in the driveway, the gate was closed. It was just the way she left it.

There was a certain feeling she knew in the air.

"Someone's gonna get hurt today," she told Mikey.

"Just keep a cool head," Mikey said back.

Mikey usually kept her calm but she was overwhelmed by this feeling of dread.

Katrin huffed, "I think maybe I'll just stay for about 30 minutes. And you guys can get a ride with your friends, ok?"

"Yeah, sure mom," Mikey said.

They walked up to the gate and buzzed the intercom. The gate opened and they were stock face with Neziz's oversized four door truck.

A lot of things happened all at once when Joyce entered the house. First, Neziz threw her arms around Joyce like she was trying to make sure she could never leave. Then Jenine stumbled up and put her hand on Joyce's hair and ruffled it violently. Neziz was shouting hysterically about how much she had missed her and Jenine was drinking a beer. Neziz said they

needed to catch up after everyone said hi to her. Sharon and Sharice both stood awkwardly and said hi, after which Sharon ran off to watch the TV some more. There was some fashion show she had recently become enamored with. Sharice asked Joyce how it was living with Mikey, and Mikey went off with Jenine to smoke a joint. Joyce was in the middle of answering the question when she caught a glance of the glare that Ariel was shooting at her. Katrin decided to join Ariel for a drink in her kitchen, since she had a good wine connection and seemed to always be fully stocked and ready to share. This took the heat off of Joyce long enough for her to start walking into the smoking room with Sharice.

She learned a good few things about how exactly things were going for her family since she had been gone. Jenine had to begin using some less extreme drugs more frequently to keep herself in a mindset in which she could work, since her being unemployed was leaving her household destitute as a burning barn. Neziz couldn't resist the temptation to join her, and now although they make rent on time every month, 30% of their joint income was spent on weed, alcohol, and cigarettes. They figured it made sense since their jobs, at Pizza Hut and Taco Bell respectively, had a nearly homogenous group of stoners in each shop, many of which would reek so much of weed during shifts that they would stain the smell onto the bags and napkins they touched. Sharon was pursuing dropping out of high school, but wasn't having luck at it considering that her mother was refusing to help her in any way and certainly wouldn't sign a form allowing her to do so. Sharice had recently gotten really into acid rock and psychedelia. Ariel was as much a mess as she ever was, and Neziz insisted that she needed to seek professional help regarding her continued addictions and personality. Of course, she didn't hear this from Ariel, because although Ariel hadn't seen her for over half a year, she was still refusing to speak with her own daughter.

Katrin cut out early, as was her plan, saying goodbye only to Ariel and quite nearly sprinting away from the house to escape the shitshow she felt coming on.

Ariel hadn't slept the days leading up to the Fourth of July. 2 days if she worked it out tight, but really 4 days if you count dozing in and out in front of 7th Heaven reruns. She was on something of a purge when it came to her relationship with her liver, in which she would purge out all of last night's wine with fresh wine every morning and every 5 minutes or so after that. She knew her habits, she knew she needed her sponsor. She couldn't remember the last time she'd spoken to him. She was sure he was dead. But she stayed strong, and she kept her mind out of thoughts of such orderly things, and toward the problem.

Joyce was coming back, and everyone was gonna be excited to see her, and everyone was gonna talk to her. Everyone would be reminded of how they loved her and ask if she could come back and stay. But she knew what would happen then. She would go the way of Jenine. Jenine was smart too. Jenine got good grades. She was the pride of the household, the baby. But when Joyce gets a bit older, and she gets herself almost killed by an F-150, Jenine stops getting good grades. She doesn't get all the attention. Ariel knew that. She was pissed. She knew that it was gonna be the same. She'd stink up the basement like cigarettes and weed and make her binge drink and destroy her life. She wouldn't be coming back.

But then there she was. Across the room. With her face like a mime. And she just looked so stupid. Ariel saw her like a child, but not like her child, like a child in one of those videos, where they fall and get hurt and cry and you laugh even though you know they hated it. She thought that was amazing the way that happened. How she went from her own daughter to something she didn't recognize.

She had thick makeup on her face, white with panda eyes, and her clothes were all black. This of course became a thing for Joyce in the last few weeks. She was experimenting with lots of styles and blogging about it. She had 1000 followers.

Ariel saw her as an idiot for coming here dressed like that. And it was hard to believe that she would've raised an idiot.

She decided not to talk to her right away and wait out some of the harsher feelings. She didn't want to drive her out of the party for no reason, she knew what it would look like and she was nothing if not a good host. Instead she decided on talking to her about Mikey's mother. Making a bit of fun. She of course had known Mikey's mom for as long as Mikey had known Jenine. She changed her mind again and decided she would talk to her about the recent heatwave. She expected that Joyce stayed interested in the climate since she was in high school. Ariel wanted to see her as smart and able to talk about things like that. She remembered when Joyce was a child.

Ariel saw Joyce turn her head away and speak quietly when she brought up the climate. Joyce didn't want to start an argument, so she was avoiding answering the question. Ariel decided she'd push something else when she actually cares about it.

Joyce sat and ate a bit of ham that was put out on a large platter. Ariel tried not to stare at her. In her head, Joyce was remarking on the pathology of her mom talking about climate change with her. She knew that it was something that was done for Joyce's benefit alone, but that she didn't want to accept that her mom was being nice to her for whatever reason she was being nice to her. Ariel was remarking on how Joyce seemed to be completely over her own mother, as if their relationship was something stupid, like dating in highschool, like those emotions and the grief could go away after just 7 months.

Joyce started talking to Neziz, who was sitting with 2 devils' horns sticking out of her ears. They were discussing the recent goings on in Dallas. Over the summer, a good few bands had made their rounds and come through, bringing with them small bursts of venue traffic and money for the local people, but also insane amounts of traffic which clashed with the city's already insane amounts of traffic. When Nine Inch Nails came into town, the Freeways were closed in certain sections and the people who drove all the way from Oklahoma to see them had to find a highway that would take them home.

Ariel listened to this conversation and imagined if it was something that she were included in. She wondered if she had made some sort of mistake allowing Joyce to leave.

So that night, with Joyce beginning to feel drunk and high with her sisters, Ariel approached her in the backyard.

There was a large fire in the pit, which climbed and licked at the powerlines just so slightly when a new log was thrown on. On the other side of the pirouettes, Sharon sat alone, Sharice sat with Jenine, and Joyce sat with Neziz. Joyce started to instinctively put out a joint when she realized that she was an adult and was allowed to smoke in front of her mother.

Sharon had a drink in her hand. She wasn't supposed to be served alcohol because she was notorious for drinking too much and doing stupid things. But Ariel wanted to be open, and she wanted to make Joyce want to talk to her, so she didn't say anything. It's not that she didn't *want* to. She fucking wanted to. Oh god, how she wanted to. She fixed her eyes on the glass and thought about just taking it out of her hand and screaming at her and telling her how stupid she was for thinking that she would be allowed to drink tonight, with how much of a fuck up she's been in her summer school courses, and how they're saying she's not going to graduate with her class.

She took a breath. She looked at Joyce. She needed to talk to her before the night was over. So she walked over. She thought that Joyce would probably move when she got over there, try and stay away from her as much as she could.

But Joyce just kept her eyes on the fire.

"Hey Joyce," Ariel said to her daughter.

"How's it?" She said back.

"How are you liking the party?"

"It's fine."

And everyone was silent, looking at the fire. Mikey and Sharice and Neziz were all inside, and it was Sharon and Jenine looking anywhere that wasn't Ariel or Joyce. Sharon sipped her drink. It was mead. It wasn't good.

"How are things going at Mikey's?"

Joyce sat and stared for a while, thinking of something to say. After a while, she mustered out, "a lot better than when you kicked me out."

Ariel knew she was going to say that. She could read it in the way that her eyes shifted between the top licks of fire. Sharon stayed and Jenine went inside, mumbling about needing a piss.

Ariel wanted to say she was sorry. She knew she wouldn't. She could feel the words bubbling at the throat and puffing out like smoke before she could stop them, "I told you what you needed to do to live here."

Sharon poked at the dirt with a long stick and played with embers that fell from the blaze. "I don't need you giving me an ultimatum," Joyce said back, still refusing to look at her mother, "I don't need that kind of stress. I need to be able to figure out what I want in life."

"Yeah," Ariel said, against her own will, "well you could've figured that out while still taking classes."

"No. No mom, you don't get it, ok."

Something in Ariel changed. She started to believe what she was saying. "Why not? Why can't you stay in school and figure it out that way?"

"Because, mom, it's not…"Joyce was cut off.

"You could've just taken your freedom at nights and weekends and just stayed in school."

Joyce took a deep breath. She stood up. "It was nice seeing you Sharon, I'll call you later."

Sharon looked up, excited, and said, "goodbye," with a wave.

Then Joyce left out the gate. She walked to the bus station and waited to be picked up.

Jenine got invited to a party that was gonna be a bit outside of town at a commercial garage that someone was using as an art studio. There were going to be bands and joints and alcohol and she was excited. She was invited by a girl that was always a bitch to her and Neziz in high school, but now Neziz and her worked together at Pizza Hut so they'd all been hanging out for a while.

Neziz brought along Sharice because she was going through a break up with her long distance best friend who was the only person she had been talking to for quite some time. Sharon clung on by threatening to run away with bikers if Ariel didn't allow her to go. She didn't actually want to go with the bikers anymore, but she was thinking of dating this football player who eyed her down a lot in the halls at school.

They were stuck in traffic in the middle of the August sunset, which lazed on the horizon and blinded the entire car for miles. It would continue this for 2 hours, until finally it was at the height where it could be blocked by the land and the things upon it.

Neziz was driving fast with all the windows rolled down, playing a song loudly about breaking up with somebody when you're still in love with them. In time they were far beyond city limits and there was nothing stopping her from letting it all out. So she let it all out. She was topping the engine at 120, blaring down 199 west, shaking and vibrating with the cab past combination farmlands and suburbs.

Jenine was unfazed, Neziz would do this in high school to let off tension. Sharon and Sharice were huddled in the back as if they were for the first time seeing God and hearing him tell them that their lives have been wrought with sin and their souls shall sink with their weight within.

Neziz slowed up when she saw off in the distance a house down a long driveway, a road really, which had a sign at the turnoff and the lights shining on it. She turned there and they were at the party.

Jenine glazed about 30 people there when they arrived, but trucks seemingly overstuffed with college age boys were pulling up in droves. She counted one with at least 11 hanging on and hanging off of one bed, with the entire front passenger seat being taken by Fireball and Busch Light.

Sharon was looking around for someone to fixate on for the night, while Sharice was crying into a book about Emma Goldman and her string of Lovers in New York City circa 1914. She was wondering how it would feel to be in that sort of life, to be able to do what you want, even if it has terrible consequences.

Out of the truck spilled the 4 girls, ready for something to happen, even if it was something they hadn't planned and didn't really care about. The fire was going strong in a pit that must have been 15 or 20 feet around and held what seemed to be an infinite amount of fuel which all at once was piling up and toppling down onto itself. A sea of freakishly hot coals spewed forth as if it were a small star warming land 200,000 miles away.

Neziz had brought 24 Twisted Teas for the party, but the way that the boys were drinking, no amount of liquor would be enough to last the night. Normally Jenine would have an easy time with this, she'd go somewhere secluded with someone who had something nice and hard and then they'd sit there and snort it together. She had been having a change of heart about all that, and it seems to change nightly. She desperately wants to use it, but she holds herself back, and for what? Just so Neziz can be more comfortable. Just so she can pretend things are good.

Sharice was 2 steps ahead. She had a joint sticking out her ear, a tab of acid and a capsule of molly, all within 2 minutes of their arrival. Sharon was waiting around for someone to offer her something the way that someone always does. It made her feel like someone who waited around all day just for one person to come and make them feel like the most special girl in the world.

Neziz was drinking wine coolers that someone brought and which none of the boys were drinking because it's a "bitchy girly drink and I'm not a faggot". For the most part, people were just trying to get around the crowds of screaming and hollering men who were hyped up from some football game that had taken place in a highschool field nearby. They were jumping around in a little pond that existed in a clearing under a willow tree, stomping on fish and falling over seemingly constantly. They must've each drank 4 drinks before they even got into the truck, because these boys were acting like they'd already been up all night despite the fact that the sun had just gone down.

Sharice got a cigarette and was trying to light it with a lighter that had just enough gas to light but not enough spark to stick. So eventually she gave up. She was sitting, leaned against a large tree away from the pond and the party. She was really acting quite dramatic for someone who just pulled up to a college party at the age of 13 (happy birthday by the way). She was sitting there like no one wanted to be around her, she was in the process of convincing herself that she was a useless piece of shit who doesn't care about anything or anybody and much less herself. She didn't even have Sharon anymore, since they've been fighting since forever it seems like, and she hardly talked to anyone in person the entire summer. She's never been more ready for the school year, because after this next one she'd be in high school and then maybe her life could get a bit better. Just like when Jenine and Neziz were in high school.

Sharon was feeling tipsy off a glass of lemonade with a shot of vodka poured on top and not mixed whatsoever. She was certainly not a drinker by any meaning of the word, and indeed she was feeling as though she had made a terrible mistake from drinking at all that night. But she had broken the seal, so she got herself another shot of vodka and drank it, then another and another, until Neziz told her to take a break and she lied down in the back of her truck to get the fiery liquid settled in her guts.

Jenine was ready to have a sort of identity crisis of which the world would never see again, but instead she was forcing her mind numb and staring at the fire. She was in intense

thought to block out any real thoughts. Often she would repeat the word “Pineapple” or “grease-fire” to block out any sort of overriding thoughts of self depreciation or of desperation to relapse. She figured that the summer was almost over and that she might as well let loose. She also figured that the summer was almost over and she should stick it out until things get easier in a few weeks. Then she figured that it would fuck up her little sisters a lot more if she ended up overdosing. Then she figured…

Fuck. Fuck there he is. The fucking Bingley. He’s here. She didn’t know he was going to be here. She figured that he was going to be moving out to somewhere else or maybe he’d just disappear but that fucking Bingley is here with his adorable red hair and the red dick hairs and Jenine couldn’t handle it. Identity crisis is now on hold, she needs a joint and a beer to take the edge off, then a couple more if she wants any chance of talking to him.

Shit, where the fuck did Neziz get off to? She was just here and it seems like she just disappeared. And now he was walking around and talking to all his dumb friends, and he was shaking their hands and touching them on the back in that little way, and she was thinking about how she wished he would touch her on the back.

Somewhere, Neziz was waking friends with a high school senior who had brought along 25 joints and was only giving them out sparingly.

“Yeah, how’re your classes and all that?” she asked.

“Oh, I’m not really into school like that,” she replied, “I’m planning on dealing after I graduate.”

Neziz raised her eyebrows, as well as a joint to her lips. “Really?” she asked, burning the paper off the tip of the joint and taking the first few puffs.

“Why do you think I’m giving out so many samples this year?” she said.

She had been teasing at the idea that Neziz was in high school and that she must have heard of her. She, in fact, was refusing to tell Neziz her name because she said that she could

“ask anyone in the hallways”. She didn’t even go to Sharon’s school, so there was no way Neziz even could’ve known her, but that was an argument that she would not hear.

Neziz said, “thanks for the sample,” and puffed her joint. “I’m going to head back over to the crowd, find some of my sisters.”

“Oh? Sister-*suh*? How many?”

“I’ve got 4,” Neziz said, and took off.

Sharice had taken up lying in the bed of the truck, a bit drunk and a bit high and a pack of cigarettes to smoke, doing nothing but feeling bad for herself. The party was getting pretty loud. Someone was playing music out of some giant speaker that was making the sand and gravel under it shake and was vibrating people’s feet as they walked from one place to another. She was looking at the stars and trying her best to hallucinate something with them. She didn’t know what, but she was trying to get something to come out of her eyes. She started with trying to get the stars to all have lines between them, like connect the dots. That didn’t work, so she tried to make herself see the stars as if they were little pieces of popcorn and then she tried to see if she could make them pop, one by one. Of course, she was quite incapable of forcing herself to see hallucinations, and so rather than seeing anything, all she had accomplished was quite a good deal of eye strain and a bit more frustration.

She stopped trying to do that and started looking for the big dipper. It was the only constellation that she ever learned how to find. In fact, it was the only constellation that she could name. She could never remember which direction she was supposed to look in. She was swinging her head wildly, looking for something that looks like a spoon in the sky. She was getting ready to give up when she finally found it. It looked nice, the way it always seemed to. She looked at it for a little while. The moon was hovering nearby.

He came out of nowhere, drunk, stumbling, moaning, he was this little redheaded boy who couldn’t have been older than 14. He was trying his best to sing a song about finding your

partner has died and left you on the earth to figure out how it is you're gonna live without them. He marched in his sort of zig zagging way past Neziz's truck and toward a bush that was large and wide and tall and concealing. He whipped out his little cock and started pissing on it.

She figured that he must've been in the grade ahead of hers since she was unfamiliar with the way he looked. She assumed that he must be going to some other school, maybe one where the boys are nice and they like to treat girls well. She was wondering about talking to him, but she figured that the worst time to introduce yourself to a guy would be immediately after they take a piss. She knows that she wouldn't want to meet someone with the first thought in her mind being "they were listening to me piss".

Instead she sat there and the boy left and she hyped herself up. She was going to join up with the party, she decided, because there was no point in her sitting here and feeling like a piece of shit. She figured that she should actually experience something in real life.

She jumped up with some force and shook the car back and forth considerably. Her hair bounced like it was made of rubber and she swooped herself over the driver side of the truck bed and onto the gravel and sand below. The party had grown in size and noise, and people were dancing and drinking and feeling themselves quite a good deal.

She came up and grabbed a drink. She drank a big swig of it. It was nasty. It was some dumb beer. She tried to drink more. She didn't think she'd have to drink so much. With weed you usually feel it after the second or third hit. She kept drinking. The can was empty. She threw it in a trash bag. She got a bottle of pink vodka. She started drinking it, big gulps, then she pulled it from her lips and twisted the cap back on. Then, she got herself a soda. She was feeling the vodka for sure. Sharice burped.

Meanwhile the party is going on fine. Neziz is talking to a boy who looked like he was 21 or 22, Jenine was sitting alone, looking at Cyr Bingley and thinking about the shape and taste of his cock. She was drinking ranch water that a high school freshman stole from his local grocery store alongside 23 others. It tasted a lot less like tequila than she was expecting it to. Mostly, she

was getting the water. Though she was focused on Cyr. There was a grave disconnect between what she wanted to think of and just how down bad she was.

Cyr was a hair shy of 6'3", and she fixated often on his right pec when she'd look at him. The shirt he was wearing had a different color over that pec that drew her eye and helped her to focus on him as if he were some kind of sculpture or painting. He never looked at her, in fact, it seemed as if he would look in any direction that wasn't directly at her. All she wanted was for him to see her.

In a lot of ways, Jenine hated the way that she looked. Others saw a normal, slightly drugged out 20 something girl with black hair and a loose sense of fashion. She saw herself as a bag of skin and bones and fat that somehow gets up every morning and tells people that she's human. If only Cyr would give her that minute or two of looking, that eye caught on her skin or her clothes or even her tits, god if only he'd at least objectify her. But that urge to be seen grew and grew and soon she was moving closer to him, avoiding the beeline by zig-zagging around like she was doing some sort of dance or ritual which required you to take up as much space as possible. She was stepping over, around, and through groups of people who were smoking, drinking, and otherwise having a great time at a party, regardless of how cold it was getting.

Then Cyr appeared before her and she froze, as she normally did. He was standing over someone, talking to him.

"If disease were unnatural, or if God didn't want us to get sick, then it wouldn't even exist," Cyr was saying, "If people weren't meant to die from disease, then God wouldn't let them. So either God doesn't exist, or disease is natural and meant to be caught and spread and to kill, and when we stop ourselves from being sick we are making an affront to God."

"Whatever dude, just get me another fucking beer," the guy Cyr was talking to seemed short and scrawny and like he didn't know anything about what they were talking about. In fact, he was scowling at the fact that Cyr thought this was something that he would feel like discussing.

“Get your own fucking beer,” said Cyr.

So he left, and Cyr sat down and was sadder than he was before. The shirt that he was wearing was tight and had short sleeves and the wind was cutting straight through it and through him and down to his soul. Then the wind stopped and things began heating up again. Someone lit another fire. Jenine was staring at the back of Cyr’s head and wondering if he would check behind himself to see her. He didn’t. If she wanted his attention, she’d need to make the first move.

She started moving slowly closer to him. She swung wide so it didn’t seem like she was trying to be a creep or just touch him or something. He was sitting on a fallen tree whose trunk was just too short to keep his legs and knees from folding concave. She saw a drink in his hand, “what’re you drinking tonight?” she asked him.

He looked up at her, “oh, hey, I didn’t know you were here. Uhm, What is this? Uh, it says, uhm, I don’t know, the label is all fucked. It’s some, like, craft IPA or something. Tastes like shit.”

“Ha,” she said, “that’s funny. I hate beer. I can’t stand it.”

“Yeah,” Cyr said, “I just drink it because everyone else does.”

Jenine giggled and then stood still. She was fully aware of how awkward she was being, she was just hoping that it wasn’t going to be a big deal to him. “Do you mind if I sit by you?” she asked.

“Oh yeah, uh, totally,” he moved over for her. She took a seat and adjusted herself around for a while trying to get her legs to not sit directly on any of the knots sticking out of the trunk. “Hey, uh, sorry, I forgot your name. I know I met you at that party we threw.”

“Oh, uh, yeah, I’m Jenine.”

“Yeah, I’m Cyr.”

“I know, I didn’t forget.”

“Cool.”

The two sat. The fire was blazing as if it were some sort of hellflame bursting forth and destroying the earth which it scorched. Cyr had a necklace on and Jenine couldn't see if it was silver or gold. Jenine felt like Cyr hated her.

"What's going on tonight?" Cyr asked.

"Nothing than a party, how's your fire?" Jenine asked.

"Hot and spewing," Cyr smirked like he was the most clever person he'd met.

Jenine giggled though she couldn't get the joke right away and was wondering if it were a joke really as much as a statement one normally wouldn't make. "Yeah, ha, it's pretty good, it's nice and big and, ugh, yeah it's pretty nice."

Cyr was drinking his drink and lighting a cigarette.

"How are you liking living in Grapevine?"

"You asked me that last time you talked to me, I think," Cyr said.

"Has your answer changed?"

"No, I don't think so."

"What have you been doing since you got here?"

"Not much, I've just been sitting around and waiting for something to happen."

"You lived in Oklahoma?"

"Yeah, yeah, I grew up in Tulsa."

"I heard y'all were from the city up there."

"Yeah, there's two cities actually."

"Cool."

Jenine felt like the conversation was dead and like nothing much was left to happen.

"Do you want to hook up with me?" Cyr asked.

Jenine had not considered the prospect.

"Yeah, that'd be good," She replied.

Cyr smiled, "you could try and seem excited," he said, and laughed.

“Yeah,” Jenine grinned and tried to hide it, “uhm, yeah, I would really like that.” She moved her body so that she was facing directly toward him, and she got closer.

Sharon was sitting on a motorcycle someone had parked in between a Lexus and a Prius. She had drinken enough within the first 10 minutes of the party for the rest of the night, and so she was riding that feeling as far as it would take her. She liked the way the bike felt between her legs, she felt like she did the night with that biker boy (dear lord, what was he called?). She was hazing back and forth. She was going to be 16 in the coming few weeks. She was going to be closer than ever to being an adult, to being taken seriously by the people in her life. She was considering all this in the haze, her body remaining off balance ever so slightly. There she sat, atop the bike, looking in the direction of the fire, watching as the dark figures which surrounded it hummed in tune and rhyme and moved fruitlessly and gracefully from each position into the next. She was confused by all this. She brought her eyes down, as anyone would after having drank all too much in all too little time.

The goal, really, was to survive the night, but in her mind this was not such an urgent thing as getting on her feet and getting more alcohol into her system. Something about the bottles of liquor which each person seemed in tune with called out to her as a sense of community does to the chronically lonesome. She found herself questioning if she were just a being that was designed to consume endless amounts of alcohol until it were so saturated with the liquor that it would explode from outward pressure placed upon its gaskets. She sat with no back support on a motorcycle which belonged to a stranger at a party where she only knew her sisters, all of which were seemingly either avoiding her outright or simply so negligent of her and self absorbed to care that she was all alone, a 15 year old girl, surrounded by strangers and bullies from her own school and from a college nearby, who equally did not seem to care at all about her. She was grease soaked into the asphalt.

Sharice would care if she died at least. She might not care if she's alive anymore but she'd at least care after the fact.

She wanted a hug. She held herself against a crisp breeze that was blowing in with a lick of a cold front on the back end. After a little while she felt herself in a presence, and when she opened up her eyes she saw a man standing over her.

"Uh, hi," he said to her.

"Heyy," she slurred out, "whatchu needin' tonight?"

"You're on my bike?"

"Huh?" she asked.

"My bike, that's my bike you're sitting on, and I don't know you."

"You're a biker?"

"I mean, no not really," he said, confused and annoyed and frustrated that she wasn't immediately standing up and letting him to his bike, "I'm not in like, a club or something, if that's what you're asking. It's just my bike, it's how I get around."

"I used to date a biker. He was in a gang."

"That's cool. Hey could you…"

"He killed people."

"I'm sorry to hear th…"

"He killed someone in front of me once."

The man stopped talking. "Ok. Hey, listen for a second. Maybe let's get you by the fire, and uh, off my bike, because you look like you're gonna fucking vom and I don't want to have to clean it. Plus you're shaking like a leaf girlie."

"Oh, yeah I guess, Uhm, where should I go then?"

"Well, there's this party. Like right over there."

"Oh, oh yeah, that would be good."

Sharice was chasing a red whale as if she were Ahab, if he had wanted some oceanic pussy. For the first bit of her little chase, she was looking just for an opportunity to speak with him, however after a while she had lost her target and, in a panic, she was running, sprinting, really, to try and find him again.

Xanax was a big friend of this party. The multidose benzopyrene was a convenient snorter since doses could be full bars to squares. As Sharice traversed the party, she was seeing the common effects of snorting Xanax as she looked into the eyes and movements of the people who stood, holding their drinks around the bonfire. Tired, relaxed, calm, happy, unworried. They would sit on the ground or lie down if they got too high, waiting for the effects to slow down enough for them to function in the party. The hardest thing about finding her boy was that she'd trip over people who lied like bodies, then she'd get up and see at least 2 people with the same curly red hair that she was looking for. In fact, they all seemed identical other than size and clothing.

She wondered if they might've been brothers and debated if she was going to ask one of them where to find the one she was looking for. But she realized that she didn't know where any of her siblings were, and that if they were his siblings then they probably would have no tabs to be had upon him. She took out her phone and opened a flashlight to use for looking through the wood for her little friend that she hadn't met yet and knew only by the color of his hair and the sound of his piss.

He was an elusive beast, intrinsically, and she could feel that in her pursuit of him. He was the kind of person who enjoyed the slip, no matter the amount of drugs or alcohol in his system he wanted nothing more than to be unseen and to keep themselves but also to do this without anyone noticing that this is what he was doing. She knew from the moment that he snuck up past the truck to piss, that he was the kind of person to know where the hiding spots were and to use them to his advantage. Such a strange obsession that she had grown for him.

She decided that a break was in order, and escaped the wood to the party to find herself a cider to drink. Cider was a preferred option for Sharice because it tasted really like juice with not much in terms of an aftertaste. She loved getting drunk without realizing it, and she loved the moment in which she'd realize it and giggle over it as if she were 13 getting a single wine cooler from her mom on christmas.

She was standing by the fire, cider in her hand then, and she was considering the night and the boy and the various things that she was thinking about him. She was clearly infatuated, not intelligently so, she knew not his name, his number, his neighborhood. She knew him by height, clothing, and hair. As things were wrapping in her mind, she began to recognize the fragility of her situation and her subsequent inability to find this boy, and the way in which all of this really was making her look like a crazed fool, searching for a ghost or a butterfly or a wild goose. So to save face, and therefore to make herself more attractive to him in general, she began to sit upon a log which was rolled near the bonfire to have as a seat.

She was sitting, looking at the flame, and wildly hallucinating. The fire was building as if it were attempting to lick the cosmos, its usage for heat was wasted largely and allowed to go up into the air. She was seeing a man in the flame, who was jumping up on top of the wood and then as high as they could jump to try and escape the burning flame despite their own being burning. She saw a horseman riding in circles around the wood and flame, dancing gaily around the hot coals and flaring up with small pieces of fuel which would fall or get caught on the coals. The horseman was wearing a 10 gallon hat with spurs which dragged far out of the edges of his shoes, and which he held far away from the horse so as to calm it. The flame-rider was moving slowly and quickly and all at once he was no longer there.

And in this trance of focus she found him, or rather he found her, although he might not've known it. He, in fact, sat directly next to her upon that same fallen tree which she was sitting on and staring unendingly into the flame. She hadn't realized he was there for a moment,

not until she went to drink from her bottle and realized that it had emptied and needed a refreshment, and she began to look around to see where she might find another.

Looking to her right, seeing him not 4 feet away, she froze.

Neziz was nearing the end of her joint and she was officially lost as far as she could tell. She had begun walking off and doing whatever it was she felt like when she got it, but now she wanted nothing more than to get back and see a face that she recognized. She was wandering, her flashlight in her hand and attached via wiring and glass and metal to her smartphone, and she was scared and growing somewhat cold despite the region and time of year. The wind of the cold front was sweeping into her and cutting through her paper thin shirt and fake denim jeans and into the very core of her being.

She was looking at the trees and trying to recognize something. The joint was burning to the tip, and she dropped it and stomped it out. She continued walking, slowly, listening, but other than the wind, things were silent, despite the amount of music and yelling that she had remembered being in the party.

The light on her phone turned off. She panicked. She started to click the button on the side of her phone over and over again. The screen wasn't turning on. The phone was dead. She was near blind, with no phone, no water, no joint. She never should've wandered off.

She stood and looked around for a while, but she realized quickly that it was hopeless, that she couldn't see anything beyond her eyes and that she needed to wait for her mind to be made feral and her eyes to adjust to low light. She took a deep breath to help with the nerves and sat down to wait for her eyes to see. She prided herself for her ability to keep calm, despite circumstance, but in this case she found herself teetering on the edge of mania.

The wood was quiet because it was listening. Truly, that night she felt the ears upon her. She would make the smallest noises and she would feel the trees thinking about the noise, she would hear them respond in their shaking leaves and creaking wood. She could hear and feel the

fluids moving throughout the tiny, open veins which traced every single cell of the tree and communicated and allowed water to flow. She heard the water collect elsewhere. She felt the breathing of the tree as the winds passed through slow and calm between its branches, knocking off the most sunbleached of the leaves. The cold wind was concentrated almost entirely on the ground, it was being pushed down straight onto Neziz's head. She felt the cold of the wind and she felt the leaching of heat from her scalp.

She heard a loud yell. She got up, she knew it must have come from the party. She started off in that direction, and the wood moved as if to try and secure some limb to grab her. She moved, oblivious and yet aware of all that was happening around her, and slowly, she heard more and more of the noises which she associated with civilization and people and safety.

There were people, sure, and there also was a fire. But there was no one Neziz knew.

Jenine was feeling hot and heavy in the back seat of Cyr Bingley's car. He was kissing her, honestly with too much tongue, he was feeling her up like a high school freshman. She was into it insofar as she had been crushing on him for so long, but in any case she couldn't get over the feeling that he barely knew what he was doing.

Things came to a head right around the same time that someone started banging on the window of the car. From inside, neither of them could tell exactly who it was, mostly they saw the fire out the tint of the windows. The clock on the dash read 10:48.

Cyr rolled down the window ever so slightly, "what do you want?"

"Cyr your brother's fucking pissed," the person said, "You've gotta take him home."

"He's alright, he can handle himself," Cyr replied, "he'll be fine."

"No man, he just passed out on some log. You've gotta get him out of here, he's gonna roll in the fire next."

Cyr looked at Jenine. She felt a pit of dread, and a lightness of relief, and all at once he kissed her, opened the door, and got out, leaving the door open for her to climb out.

Jenine did get out, she went to stand by the fire. She found Sharice there. She was sobbing somewhat but holding herself together like a little girl having a bad time at her own birthday party. There Cyr picked up his brother, who to Jenine was a nameless faceless red blob with an air of vodka around him. Cyr carried him on both of his shoulders like a fireman carrying someone out of a burning building. He stepped quickly. All along, the party never stopped, no one stopped talking or drinking or laughing. Most people weren't paying any attention to Cyr and his brother. Jenine was fixated, and Sharice as well, and so to them it seemed as if this were the most important thing to happen all night. After all, each of them were being separated from that boy which they saw as something they could've taken as theirs. And so each of them watched in longing as the boy were laid in the back seat of the car, and Cyr, waving at the party, sat in his seat and drove off.

Sharon was having a real problem with assimilating into this party. Normally she would cling to Sharice but she would rather be alone nowadays. She sat by the fire and stared at the man whose bike she sat on. He was glancing at her every once in a while to see if she was still staring at him. He had a brown bottle of some kind of beer in his hand. She watched him talk to his friends. Eventually she grew bored of that and started to look at the fire. She found that fixations became more prominent to her when she became slightly drunk. On the other side of the flame she saw Jenine and Sharice standing slack jawed. She would've asked them why if she hadn't decided already that she wasn't going to. Cyr walked with a screaming drunk mess of a 13 year old with bright red hair over his shoulder, both hands wrapped around his thigh. He took the boy to a car, put him in, and started driving.

Jenine and Sharice were gossiping about something and Sharon was sitting there, some kind of thought trying to make itself present in her mind. That thought was that she wanted to be as drunk as the redheaded boy.

She stood and moved herself immediately to a place where she knew she could find alcohol. She pulled a bottle of Popov, plastic handle, and began to drink from it as if it were a bottle of water. She sipped sometimes, and other times she took big chugs, and she remarked that although the vodka was terrible, she was able to keep it down. She always had a good deal about not really tasting alcohol, but that's not really true. She could taste the flavor of the drink, but the sensation of the alcohol was not a sensation that she had ever been familiar with. She drank the Popov, too much all at once really, and after a few minutes, when she began to feel it, she found herself going up to the man who owned that motorcycle.

He looked at her with confusion, a crook in his eyebrow gave it away more than the rest of his face. She held up the bottle as if to offer him a drink, but he turned it away, "Popov tastes like shit," he said.

She was mostly non-verbal, as she was fighting to keep the 4 or 5 drinks that she'd had in the past 15 minutes down and she felt that if she were to open her mouth then there'd be no chance that he'd see her again.

"Are you ok?" he asked her.

Suddenly, she swallowed and felt good enough to speak, "I'm alright, yeah, I just saw that kid and wanted to get drunk like him," she said.

"Oh, yeah? What, you wanna get carried out and forced to go home early?" he asked.

"No," she said, "I don't need to go home, I just want to get drunk."

"How much have you drank?"

"I don't know."

He looked at her, and he looked at her bottle. And he decided that he would keep talking to her, "What's your name?"

"Sharon," she said, "What about you?"

"Marky."

Neziz was not trustful of the group whose eyes fell on her so quickly when she came out from the clearing. They were wearing all black, leaning up against their bikes and smoking cigarettes. When she looked at them, her heart felt as though it had sunken and she froze like an opossum.

There were 7 or 8 men, with 3 or 4 women. They were leatherbound, they wore jackets with patches, some were holding knives, some had guns prominently displayed. Neziz knew what kind of men they were. She could see it, the same way anyone could. They were all looking at her, nothing else took their attention. They were silent, fixated. She stood there frozen. After a moment, one of them said, “you alright girl.”

“Yeah,” another said, “you lost or something?”

“Say,” one of the girls said, “where you come from, baby?”

“Hey what’s your name girl?” one said, walking forward. He had a bandana wrapped around his head, a stocky build, tall though.

She bolted. Back and to the right. And she slipped, and she fell into a weed that cut thorns into her skin and left her bleeding, and she got back up and tried to bolt again but the man was upon her.

He was grabbing her by the shoulders, holding her arms down. She kicked at him and his grip slipped and she bolted again. He grabbed at her hair and ripped out a patch of her short fuzz as she left. “Get back here, you little fucking dyke!” he yelled, but Neziz didn’t look back. Something in her brain told her that the wood would keep her safe and so she clamored into it and ran and kept running.

So Neziz found a place to hide, as she couldn’t run forever, and this patch of wood seemed to stretch infinitely in all directions except the ones in which danger lay. She had climbed a great tree, one which may have been written about as a gathering place of witches in an old pulp novel. She sat there among the twigs which poked just so that she couldn’t rest fruitfully against the trunk. She looked out and listened to the group search for her, far off near where they were before. In the end they gave up. She didn’t hear of them again.

Jenine was sitting next to Sharice. It was starting to get late, and cold, and Jenine was considering going home. She asked, “how’re you doing Sharice?”

“I’m ok, I guess.”

“What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know, I was looking at that boy.”

“Oh?” Jenine said, “really? A boy. I don’t think I’ve heard you talk about boys before.”

“Yeah, I’ve been kinda fixated on him tonight.”

“Is it that friend you had from Chicago?”

“No,” Sharice said, “he didn’t like me all that much. He didn’t want to talk too much with a middle schooler.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Jenine said.

“It’s ok,” Sharice responded.

“But I mean fuck him, right. Like, you’re cool.”

“Yeah.”

“Like you don’t need him, you know.”

“Yeah I know.”

“Well. Ok, sorry, started talking about bullshit. What about this boy?”

“He’s cute, I guess.”

“Yeah, but who is he?”

“I don’t know his name, he was that little redhead boy.”

Jenine twisted her eyebrows at Sharice, “the one who got carried out drunk?”

Sharice laughed, “yeah, he’s cute.”

Jenine chuckled, “I just hooked up with his big brother.”

“What?” Sharice asked, alarmed.

“Well? I was hanging out.”

“What the fuck?”

“What? What do you want me to say?”

“Why does everything I do have to be someone’s handmedown?”

Jenine scoffed, “I don’t know, man, just. It shouldn’t matter.”

Sharice sat for a minute. “I guess it doesn’t.”

“Ok, so are you mad then?”

“Whatever Jenine,” Sharice said to her.

Neziz lit a cigarette and sat down on the fallen log. Her head was filled with a thick fog from the lack of water she’d had for to run shy of 3 miles in the dead of night. The men weren’t chasing her, that she was sure, but she couldn’t find her way back, just the same. It was dark and the flame on her lighter was low and lame and barely enough to bring the cherry to form. The light of the cigarette was for a while the only thing she could see. She focused her eyes away from it to try and adjust them. She decided to keep moving. She stood and walked in one direction. It was something she’d heard of once, that was supposed to be a good idea.

She didn’t know much else about it. The main thing that she was thinking was that she was thirsty. For the most part that was the only thing that she could think of was water. She was sucking at her mouth, trying to form some spit. She didn’t know where to go or what to do. She just kept moving because she needed more than anything to find a drink. Where they were was a large enough nature preserve. There was a lot of woodland, that’s where she was, and outside it there were prairies and fields that had little streams and canals that ran through them. She was, of course, oblivious of this, and walked the wooded area fruitlessly for about an hour.

She called out, “Is there anyone there?” and upon the silence which responded, she laid her head against a low branch of a tree. She dropped her body to the ground and wept, mourning the loss of her own life. The cold was carrying on as it does, the wind was cutting

through her underdressed self and into her bones, she felt betrayed by the world and the season, she felt as though she were being personally attacked by every gust that washed over her.

In time she would learn to sleep in the cold.

Sharon and Sharice were waiting in the car. They were refusing to talk to each other, as they often did. It was cold, but Jenine was out looking for Neziz. Many people were leaving, it was nearing early morning, and soon the sun would peak from the horizon. Jenine had piled three small hoodies on and was running around trying to ask people if they'd seen her. No one had. Sharon looked out the window to her right, and out there she only saw the red glow of the embers which continued to sit and wait upon that wood as if it were catching a train. She imagined that Bobby was there, that he came out of the woods at the treeline. She could almost see him there, coming out and looking for her.

Sharice was looking out the windshield. She saw a biker come out of the treeline, with 3 others staying just behind it, and start questioning Jenine, so she got out of the car and said, "What's going on?'

"Get away from me!" Jenine was yelling.

"What're you doing out here girl?" Bobby said.

Sharon opened her door up and got a better look.

"Get the hell away from her," Sharice yelled at him.

"What's going on here?" another of the men asked Bobby.

"Found us that girl," Bobby said.

"Who the hell are you?" Jenine yelled.

"Bobby?" Sharon asked.

"Bobby?!" Sharice said to Sharon.

"What was she doing here?" one of the other men asked.

Sharice stepped out of the truck and closed the door. She clutched a small knife.

“Just looking around confused, just like earlier,” Bobby replied.

“That ain’t the same girl,” another man said.

“Sure it is,” Bobby replied. “They look just the same.”

Sharice was approaching and stood now just away from the fire. There was a high schooler passed out on a log next to her. He moaned a girl’s name in his sleep.

“Bobby! Get the hell off her!” Sharon ran up to him and started grabbing at his arm.

“Oh, hey, it’s you, mama’s girl,” Bobby said. “Step the fuck off.”

Bobby shoved Sharon to the side. A couple jocks stood up, one fell over and the other tried to fight Bobby. He swung and missed and traveled to the ground not unlike a missile might. Bobby was left unscathed. The other 3 bikers were armed, one a knife and another a pistol. Some small thing that he could fit in his pocket.

Sharice was scrambling in the glove box of Neziz’s truck. There was meant to be some kind of weapon in there, she thought, she remembered her and Jenine talking about it up in the front seat. Some kind of pepper spray maybe.

Sharon was crying on the ground, looking up at her sister who was being held by the hair and neck by Bobby. “You bastard Bobby. I loved you.”

“Loved me?” Bobby said in a rhetorical way, “What the hell is wrong with you? You run off with bikers one night and think you’re some motor princess?”

Sharon wiped her tears and dirt mixed in with them, she had a line of mud across her cheek from it. She was in some kind of shock, some kind of misunderstanding in her mind was now becoming corrected and it was clear to her that she had led herself astray.

Neziz followed sounds of commotion north. She saw light and bikers, and she crouched down in the bushes and watched what they were doing. She saw her sister held by one of them, another on the ground, and low to the ground next to her truck, she saw Sharice with a snub nose revolver.

“I’m glad I left you there, at that shitty house. Jesus, what a pain you’d’ve been.”

“Hey man,” Jenine said, “What’s the plan here?”

“Shut up, slut, why the fuck would I tell you?”

“I’m just saying,” she said, “What are you gonna do here? There’s a whole lot of people here, we’re at a state park. What are you gonna do about all that? What about you just let us go?”

“Shut up I said,” Bobby tightened his grip around Jenine’s throat. She was gasping for air, her eyes welling up.

“Stop it Bobby!” Sharon wailed, “Please! You’re hurting her!”

“Quit fucking telling me what to do!” he said.

Neziz saw as Sharice pointed the gun at Bobby, and she pulled the trigger. She watched as a sputter of red popped out of his side like she’d popped the cork on a Champagne bottle. He let go of Jenine then, and his friends picked Bobby up.

They were screaming something gnarly, the gunshot frightened them. Then came another, this time not hitting any of them. Bobby limped away with his friends with Sharice shooting at them, and Jenine ran to try and stop her. She grabbed the gun out of her hand. That’s when one of Bobby’s friends turned and fired back. He fired off all the shots in his gun and then ran.

Jenine and Sharice had hid behind the truck when they fired back. When they were gone, the few awake people still at the party woke everyone else up and got out, calling the police no doubt.

“You ok?” Jenine asked.

“I’m uh,” Sharice was shaking, “I’m ok.”

Neziz saw her sister lying on the ground, shot through her arm and torso. She ran up to her. “Jenine!” She screamed, “Call an ambulance.”

The sun shone its bright bald head over the edge of the world, and suddenly the night had become morning.

Ariel saw the news anchor sitting smartly in her desk chair. It was Kate Wildly, the 10 am announcer. The camera panned from the top of the studio down to her eye level, and from there the camera remained stagnant, fixated on her. The anchor said, “This is Kate Wildly, bringing you your 10 am news. Our top story today, two teens were left wounded after a shootout near Dinosaur valley in the early hours of the morning. Eyewitnesses say that a biker gang was harassing and assaulting partygoer Jenine Bennet, when her sister, Sharice Bennet opened fire on the gang. In the shooting which ensued, Sharice’s sister Sharon Bennet, as well as Justin Cleberts, Lancaster High’s running back, were wounded. They are both recovering in hospital. All known gunmen have been taken into custody.”

Ariel turned off the TV and called Neziz.

The heat faded somewhat and a time of change was given unto the Dallas/Fort Worth area in a season which Mikey’s mom called “Herbst”. Sharice was to be released, finally, after 2 months of work and court dates and visitation hours. Finally, she was deemed to be no threat, to have acted in self defense. The whole family was there to meet her at the gates. Joyce was wheeling Mikey. Altogether they had to come in 3 cars, since Ariel’s is only a 2 seater.

Sharon was shot through her forearm, with the bullet lodging itself firmly in her hip, grinding against the bone. Since then she’s had to walk with a cane. The doctor said she was lucky it wasn’t a wheelchair. At least now she could move all her fingers independently. She stood behind Jenine.

Mikey was talking to Joyce about their plans for halloween. They had already decorated the house, and they were wondering if they should go to any haunted houses. Joyce was mentioning one at the fairgrounds that was supposed to be 3 miles long, a winding and terrifying experience. Mikey was concerned that there would be stairs, so he was trying to research it on his phone to find the answer.

Jenine was sitting. She had been smoking a lot more weed as of late to try and keep herself from using so many opiates, which she had fallen back into despite her previous feelings toward the drug. In general, in fact, she was trying to coincide the way that the opiates made her feel with how life was supposed to feel, she managed, from time to time, to convince herself that for normal people the everyday life that they were accustomed to was something which to her was achieved only by using a good deal of oxycontin.

Mikey couldn't feel good about going to a 3 mile haunted house which didn't advertise its ability to accommodate the legless, Joyce was disappointed but didn't say much because she didn't have anyone else to go with. Instead she was herself looking for a different one.

Ariel was holding onto Neziz's arm and squeezing it. Neziz was blank faced, holding it straight. She was replaying the sight of Sharice blowing a hole in a full grown man, and then one being put through Sharon, she was staring at the back of Sharon's head.

And there she was, the head of the hour, the one they'd all been waiting for, after a mere 10 week stint in the can, live from Juilliard's Correctional Facility for Juvenile Delinquents, Sharice Bennet.

She walked through, in the same clothes she was wearing when she got sent in. She even kept her little, fingerless, kitten mittens. She pressed one against the bar, there was a loud buzz, and the gate swung open. She was free, or close as she had been, there in the intake/output room. Ariel hugged her first, of course, you can't expect a mother not to hug her child out of prison. Of course Sharice didn't really want much to do with her, not make in her family did, Ariel became quite demonized, naturally, as a result of the fourth of July debacle. Niceties, then, were postponed, as Sharice pointed out that she'd like to get out of the center so soon as she could manage.

Sharice decided she'd wait until the cars to let them stop and celebrate and be happy, she was thinking about it, dreaming about it in fact, the reunion in the parking lot, her whole family,

right there. Each glance, stare or look she was able to get at that parking lot reminded her of it. It became her reason to keep going.

Certainly Joyce must not've understood how much this 10 week stint affected Sharice. She clearly didn't, in fact, as she was talking incessantly about the types of candy that she and Mikey would be buying. The wind picked up a bit. Joyce snapped to a bit, she said, "you know, you really did the right thing Sharice."

They were halfway to the car and Sharice refused to speak to anyone until they had cleared the yard. She was supposing that if they got all the way out that they couldn't take her back anymore, that she wasn't truly free until she was in the car and going back to the Dallas/Fort Worth area. Or closer to their part of it, anyway, since it seemed the metro expanded by the year, creeping closer and more around to any industrial zones or internment areas which were once meant to be far secluded from the city centre.

In some ways she was right to try and give herself that time to think after such a time spent in an internment institution. Mikey was unconcerned, he was near completely focused on Joyce now, fixated really, watching the way she scrolled through her phone as she walked. She started dressing differently in the past year, generally it would be described as wearing less. When she was in school, she had often worn the same cookie-cutter cartoon character outfits that she was accustomed to from childhood: a weak pink long skirt with a short sleeved shirt with a strange design of some sort contained therein, a dress with a poodle stitched into the skirt, sometimes she'd still wear her Hannah Montana merch. She didn't like dressing like that anymore. Something changed, and she didn't care to learn what it was that was different, figured she'd leave that mystery to the people who would get to know her.

The cars were parked all one next to another in the center of the lot, Sharice stopped in between them and lied on the ground flat on her back, and closed her eyes. Then she stood up and got in Neziz's truck to be taken home. She received a couple of hugs through the door, Joyce and Mikey said goodbye and went to find their way to the bus stop, which was a mere 20 minute

walk. Suddenly there were a good deal of rapid explosions, although no alarm was raised, and soon the girls were driving back to Grapevine.

Jenine's drug problem had ballooned in such a way during Sharice's stint in Juvy that she was not sneaking half pills up her nose 3 times a day in between working, which she now did as a Doordash driver with a bike that was 2 sizes too small for her and had an iCarly sticker on the handlebars, seeing Cyr, who was now a weekly hookup in some ways and in other ways was the main companion in her life, and sleeping. Essentially, this had become her life as she reached further into her 20s and closer to her death. She made on average $5 an hour riding her bike, not made any easier by the fact that it seemed to max out around 8 miles per hour, being a 1 speed.

The iCarly bike, as she had grown to call it, was from a Goodwill which sat near the east edge of town, she bought it because it was $10, and she knew that she would be able to make that back pretty easily. She didn't want to spend a couple hundred on a Walmart bike just to spend 2 days paying off the expense. However, she did understand how ugly the bike was, and how ridiculous she would look riding it, and even still she needed it and she understood that she needed it. And so the bike became both her savior and her enemy. On the one hand it was her sole income, on the other it meant that she would need to run around on top of two little pedals that could barely hold her weight, biking down the sidewalks and trying so goddamn hard for sometimes only 2 or 3 dollars.

Sharice had been in the hold for about 3 weeks and Jenine had decided that if the bike failed, if it were to at all fall apart or break, if the chain were to stop or if the wheels stopped turning, hell, even if it got a flat tire, that she would throw it out and get a new job. She made this promise to herself, she believed that it was the best choice because, after all, iCarly hadn't been on the air for years. The bike must've been old as hell, there was no way that this little mix of plastic and metal and rubber would last longer than the month.

Now Sharice was out, she was taking time off school, and every day, for her lunch break, Jenine would ride over or get a ride from Neziz or take the bus to Sharice and Sharon and visit them, before taking on another job and picking up more food for someone too burned into the hole in their couch to get out long enough to walk or bike or drive 2-5 minutes and get their own Burger King.

She left Ariel's house for the Burger King, which was the closest fast food place to their suburb, alongside a Taco Bell and, if you count them, a Walgreen's and a 7/11. The neighborhood was overwhelmingly white, and so the Taco Bell only really got business late at night, as they were a 24/7 location and drunk people seem to have some sort of proclivity toward the Bell. Jenine only worked that once because after 10 they closed the lobby and they wouldn't let her pick up from the drive through because she was on a bike. It was profitable, though, made her wish she had a car. Instead she would continue, for the foreseeable future, to ride around, standing the whole time, going only 7 or 8 miles per hour, on her little iCarly bike, far too small to her to the point where she looked like a clown, paying near every cent she made on rent and food. She was living the life.

Cyr she'd see Thursdays or Fridays, usually depending on what he decided he wanted more. He'd pick her up and take her out to dinner. She'd be pretty fucked off on some kind of drug, whether that be weed, which to her was like water at this point, or oxy (or some other opiate that she was able to come into possession of, but she had an oxy guy, so mostly oxy). Often she would be somewhat sober when she was out with Cyr, but in general this was done with the understanding that the next morning, when she woke up before him, shaking and sobbing once again, that she would be able to get out of the bed, take a pill, or half a pill, or one and a half, or two, once she went for four, crush it up, breath it in, and go back to sleep. He didn't know she was back on oxys, but he also didn't ask her where she spent the money he gave her, so there were a lot of things he didn't know.

For example, since he never asked, he didn't know that Jenine didn't actually own any mattress in her house, that she slept on a pile of loose clothing that she would jumble up underneath her to give some sort of padding from the linoleum tile, which covered most of the house, except for the kitchen, which had a shag carpet. He also didn't know that there was a pretty bad cockroach infestation, that they had to keep their food in jars wrapped in cling wrap, just to keep some white rice from having the little beasts fill it up and fill it with shit. He didn't even know that she was riding an iCarly bike for her main form of transportation.

In the morning, no matter what, even if she was out of drugs or if she didn't have a cigarette, she had to get back to her house by 11 so she could do the lunch rush on DoorDash. Cyr would drop her off, and give her a kiss, and pull off in his BMW that was only 2 years off from its production date. Cyr didn't have a job. He would go home and relax, check his stocks. She'd put her hand on top of the picture of Sam's face on the neck of the bike and lead it outside to go and work.

In time Sharon began to more fully understand the toll that her time behind bars had affected her sister. She would knock on her door 3 times a day, she wouldn't come out, in that room painted a clear green with a tinge of black to balance things out. Often she'd yell in response, saying she'd wanted to be alone, that she didn't want to come out. Sharon would respond, often by saying, "come on, come hang out. I haven't seen you in so long," to which Sharice would often refuse to respond. Then Sharon would leave, sometimes telling Ariel what had happened, and then go back into her room. She'd stay in there, sometimes doing homework, sometimes smoking, sometimes just lying there and listening, but each night she would hear her sister get up out of bed, quietly, go down the stairs and begin to cook herself a meal. Often she would do this past 2 am, when she knew that Ariel would be dead out and Sharon would likely be in suit. It would be her only meal every day, so it would be quite a large meal, often she'd make large bowls

of food or otherwise find herself coming back for plate after plate for hours, until finally she'd throw the rest out, and clean the evidence of her having done this.

In some ways this was a piece of avoidance that she preferred to keep in, wherein she would be able to operate in her life the way she wanted to and not a single person in her house could have a single say about it, since she did the things she did outside her room under cover of night. Then she'd return to her room, and she'd go to sleep, and the next day she'd refuse to go to school again. This went on for weeks.

Ariel, every morning, would pound on the door demanding that Sharice would come out and go to school and each day Sharice would scream back that she was a stupid bitch and she didn't know shit and she needed to step the fuck off. Then Ariel would bang some more and yell some more and Sharice would scream some more and cry some more and so Sharon didn't need an alarm clock to get up in the morning anymore. She would get up and brush her teeth and watch as her mother placed more and more dents in the door with that fist which was getting closer and closer to just splitting open and bleeding on the carpet. In the end Sharice wouldn't go to school. She had no reason as far as she was concerned. People would only treat her as a freak.

In her room, all day, alone, avoiding Ariel who would spend the day drinking, she would often find herself engaging in one of the 3 following activities: smoking (which consisted both of cigarettes and joints, although she often ran out of weed and would need to reup during), walking (which was her main connection to the outside world, where she'd step out, walk the suburbs and eventually she began to form relationships with local deviants and losers who would speak to her and sell her drugs in return for her mother's jewelry), and surfing the internet (which droned her mind to numbness into the early morning). Numb was a good way to describe her feelings most of the time, she had learned to be numb when she first had a full body search at the police station. She figured to be numb was better than to be in pain and so she attempted her best to be numb. She made a humming noise in her ears and blocked out what

was happening to her and closed her eyes and even tried to hold her breath to stop from feeling her skin. She'd numb herself, then, to a few different things what were a regular occurance: verbal abuse from the guards, physical and mental abuse from the other inmates, the dripping sounds of pipes leaking in the walls all night, the lack of privacy in the bathrooms and showers, the impossibility of natural life in the cold concrete which held her feet up from the earth.

The day had half passed and Sharice got out of bed, her mother downstairs watching a cop show that Tommy had specifically told her about and how racist and awful it was. She got up and stood and the blood rushed out of her brain and she swayed lazily in wait for it to return, and began to feel for the first time that day. Up until then she had stayed still and sideways, lying on her side and making it clear to herself that she had no intention of moving. She dressed, went to the bathroom, and left the house, despite her own wishes. She couldn't stand to overhear that show, to think of Tommy again was too much to bear.

She was thinking about it when she was walking, the way she normally did; to leave the suburb and get around where there are actually things to do other than sit in someone's home and get drunk, one would have to spend about 10 minutes walking north, then another 20 west. Then you could catch a bus to get to Dallas, if you really wanted to do something interesting. Normally though, she'd stay around, the city was too big for her to handle right now and there were too many cops out there.

She was thinking of calling Tommy again while she began her walk west, but the thing was that she understood why Tommy didn't want to be with her. He was a whole three years older, and he was in Chicago, and there was nothing he could do to change that and it was the same with her. He was in his sophomore year of high school and she was in middle school. Really, she never should've taken it all that seriously, but now she was scared to open Second Life in case he might be on there and think that she was trying to confront him. She was so anxious about ever speaking to him again and she knew that she would never do it, so she tried

to numb herself once again and yet it was fruitless this time and instead she continued her walk westward, a knot in her lungs which hardly permitted her to breathe.

She was reaching the edge of the suburb, after 30 solid minutes of walking, and there she saw that familiar strip mall in which half of the stores were closed down 5-10 years ago and never replaced by anything better or even anything worse, the faded flipped signs just sitting there and growing more and more opaque with time. There was a group of skeeves who dropped out of high school and would sit around in the parking lot there or sometimes behind the strip mall, specifically behind Crazy Ed's ExtraHot Chicken, where one of their friends worked and would sometimes get them gravy tenders for free. Sharice met them a few weeks ago, and by now she was a well known character, 2-3 times a week.

A sort of banter had already overtaken the skeeves, they were discussing some extremely specific scene in a small indie video game that they had all played at some point. They were in a great debate about the validity of one's straightness if they would, as a videogame character, receive a blowjob from a man, without experiencing arousal or masturbating to it. There was a heated argument happening between two of them, one person clearly being the most defensive. He said, "Dude it's not fucking gay and even if it was that wouldn't be a bad thing." That was Jeremy, he was a redhead. It was Garrett who was teasing him, he was talking about the time in grade school when they were all going around saying who their crushes were and instead of "Lupe" like he meant, Jeremy said "Luke" and it would appear this is still a common topic of conversation even as the skeeves approached their 20s.

There were only 2 more of them at the parking lot this time: Luke, the one that Jeremy said he had a crush on, and Johnnet. Johnnet was called Johnnet because he used to wear a bonnet to bed, even when he'd have sleepovers. He was fine with it but still made a big fuss every time someone would bring it up to a new person. The first time that they'd told Sharice, he got so angry he tried to punch the window out of his car. That was something he did often: get so

angry that he would try and punch the window out of his car. Seemed to happen twice a day. Never been successful though.

Johnnet was leaning up against his car, smoking a cigarette and making himself appear to be quite a good deal cooler than he was in his day to day life. As he pleased his ego, he found himself thinking quite a bit differently and suddenly he was overtaken by a drive to hear some Johnny Cash. Johnnet loved Johnny cash, and he loved him for 2 reasons, the first being that His dad liked Johnny Cash, and the second being that in all actually he was originally named after Johnny Cash. And this meant, for Johnnet, that Johnny Cash needed to start playing. In all honesty, he did this every time he bought Marlboros.

Luke was twiddling his thumbs pretending he wasn't there, as much as he hated being in this group of skeeves he also knew that there was no other way for him to talk to other people his own age during daylight hours. Garrett stopped showing off to Sharice and Jeremy greeted her.

"Whazup, girly girl," he said, "You got something for us or are you just coming to visit?"

Sharice wasn't talking to them, actually, as much as she often would. She had a 5 in her pocket and she was going to go to the corner store to buy herself a bottle of coffee. Then if she felt like it she would go out and talk to the skeeves, if not she was thinking that she would just keep walking, take the bus into the city, go downtown and feel like a number.

The storekeep was a bastard, she knew that, but it was the closest store, she could've walked an extra 5 blocks to Walgreens, but she was tired and she wanted the coffee sooner and assholes charge the same price per bottle. She opened it and began to drink; it was some kind of local coffee company that would bottle their coffee for shelf purchase, she got a mocha flavored one. She stepped out and Johnnet was there, staring through the glass, trying to see her, trying to figure out where she was in the store. He wasn't very good at it clearly. "What the hell are you doing, skeeve?"

"I'm no skeeve 'Reese, I were just waiting on ya'." Johnnet smirked at her and continued to smoke, although his cigarette was seemingly half way down the filter.

Through observation, Sharice began to understand the way that cigarette smoking worked with the skeeves. They didn't have access to hard drugs, and weed made too much money to smoke, so having a cigarette and a drink was the main way that these people hung out, all the way from middle school. They were drinking, out in the open, and it wasn't even noon.

"Let me go, let me just get home, I were just getting coffee."

"Ah whatever 'Reese," Johnnet said back to her, "you only come around when you want pot, you know that? Breaks a guys heart."

"I'm not buyin' and I'm not talkin', fuck off for a minute," she said, and started walking.

They liked when she talked to them like that. The main appeal of Sharice at this point in her brand new mindset was that she walked around, a foul mouthed bitchy 13 year old who wouldn't stick around long enough for that schtick to get boring.

She was going to a bus depot which she could then use to get to different parts of the city, although she mainly wanted to go downtown. She figured with the time of day being what it was and the sheer sprawl of Dallas it would take about 30 minutes for her to get there once she got on the bus and it was moving. She ended up going to the station and arriving downtown after an hour and a half. She had 3 hours before she needed to get back on the bus and get home.

She had left $12.75, so she wasn't planning on buying much. She mostly came for a specific feeling that she got once when she was younger, the first time she went downtown. When you leave the bus at the start of downtown, you can walk a few blocks east and there's a large park, not nearly as large as, say, Central Park, but large nonetheless, and held within the fields and trees one may find the fountain, a marble and copper structure which attempted to mimic the ones which have stood hundreds of years in Europe. Once, when she was young, she came there, and she fed the ducks using a bit of feed that a stranger gave her. Then she sat and watched the people walk past.

She didn't have feed, but she sat at the fountain. Many of the ducks who hung around the park weren't the kind that migrate, they weren't even wild ducks, the vast majority were pet

ducks that people abandoned at the park when they realized that they didn't have the space, time, or patience to take care of them. She felt the same with her mom, Ariel had a strong tendency to give up on her kids once they begin acting out. Sharice didn't act out, she shot someone. She might as well not be her daughter anymore.

Sharice thought about Bobby and Sharon. While Sharice was facing trials and hearings, Sharon would testify about Bobby, his character, as she was one of the victims of the shooting and she had a direct connection to Bobby through her night of history with him. She would talk about the things that happened the first time she met Bobby, his character, the people he hung around.

This was an interesting case that Sharice was involved in, actually, and it was interesting for the fact that Sharice was being tried based on the things that people around the crime scene had seen or heard, not based on what had actually happened to Bobby, because Bobby was in hiding, likely outside of the state but at the very least in a far off county in which he was able to receive treatment and escape police custody. Everyone knew that Sharice shot someone, someone that everyone was pretty sure was called Bobby just because of how much everyone kept saying his name while it was happening. But there were different stories. A lot of the frat boys questioned by the police claimed one of two things, either that they had actually fought Bobby and that he shot Sharon in retaliation for losing, or that Sharice shot both Bobby and her sister, because she was a crazy bitch with a thirst for blood. This was very unhelpful for the case overall, as they were the only people who stayed that late at the party other than the sisters.

Of course all of their stories were the same, Jenine was the only one who was even high there and she didn't even use that much, she just snorted a couple pills at the start of the night. Sharice obviously saw what happened, Neziz was at the treeline watching, and Sharon got shot. They ended up being the most consistent testimony, but it took a while for their story to be believed. With one of the victims of the shooting still missing, there was a big feeling that they'd find the body and the murder charge would move up from attempted to homicide. With time,

though, it was confirmed the gang he ran with, the crimes that they were accused of, mostly thanks to Sharon going with the police to show them where they had their headquarters.

Sharice regretted letting her even go back there, she thought it was too dangerous. It was impossible for her to stop her. She was told the day of by Jenine when she came to the center during visiting hours.

Sharice decided then that she wasn't an abandoned duck, that she didn't need her mother's support. None of her sisters received it, and they're doing alright all things considered.

Jenine was teetering on the edge of madness. She was going through a withdrawal and lying in her bed, nearly unable to move, feeling like death ate something that went bad a few years ago. She was smoking a roach trying to shake out some lead but instead the thought of getting on that bike to go and see her dealer made her want to vomit. The roach was burning paper.

"Neziz?!" she yelled. The house was empty. She crawled her way to the kitchen and got water. The blood fleeted from her brain with every movement. She drank greedily. The linoleum was unseasonably cold, as it always seemed to be, and in some of the corners there was a good deal of warping and peeling which exposed slightly the concrete foundation which they were placed directly upon. Jenine filled her glass.

The iCarly bike sat slouched in her corner where it lived, leaned up against the wall and its own kickstand. It was drenched in its own purple maroon glow that reflected back off the white wall where the bike reflected it in the first place, a sort of cycle that the light would go to each day around this time. As the time passed the light stopped reflecting, it stopped sheening, and the purple of the bike sunk back into itself and Jenine went into the bathroom and scrommitted for a while.

She sat down next to the toilet, nothing came out because she hadn't eaten that day, and she lit a cigarette. It both calmed and agitated her stomach and made her feel as though she were regaining her lucidity for a moment. She had about $300 sitting and she got her phone out

there, on linoleum printed with an aquamarine floral pattern. The cigarette made her vomit stomach acid but she felt a bit more awake after and she was able to stand.

She called Cyr, she figured maybe he could send her money or maybe they could just talk. But the whole time she was thinking of the reason she needed a loan. Hungry, she was hungry, she needed money for groceries. And medicine. She was sick, she had a cold or something, she was dry heaving stomach acid and couldn't work because of it. Neziz was waiting on her paycheck, it was coming in on Friday, and she was in so much pain. And she was desperate, she would do anything to repay him.

He didn't answer. She thought about calling again but she came to her senses. She put the phone down on some counter or table and started walking, her head got lighter and her body got heavier and she collapsed on the bed with half her body dragging off and slowly bringing her to the floor. She expended quite an effort to keep herself up, then, and she was able to wrench her body onto the bed and give it a bit of wiggle room so it wouldn't fall again. And then she lied face down on the bed and thought of better times.

Therein grew a miserable energy, one that drove her to any end to end the pain she was in. She went to Neziz's room, she searched, ravenously for cash, she didn't find any. She started looking for things to sell. She started searching drawers for jewelry. She didn't find any. She left Neziz's room. She found her truck keys. She took Neziz's truck to Ariel's house, the experience was a blur, she pulled up to the gate, hopped it, ran to where the spare key was, used it to open the door, ran past Ariel, up the stairs, into Ariel's room, and began searching again. The process took about 30 minutes. After Ariel screamed a good few times Jenine ran out of gas and collapsed. She was passed out and shitting her pants.

Joyce was used to visiting Jenine in the hospital. It was one of her favorite places to visit her. It made her incredibly sad, but it was the best time to see Jenine. She was detoxing, she was grateful for everything, she was present.

She didn't know that Jenine was back on oxys. Neziz knew, Ariel knew, but no one else knew. Mikey had been taking a class at the trade school, he was trying to be a welder. He didn't see them much anymore, he saw Joyce when he was at the house for about 30 minutes at a time.

Joyce was working at an A&W that paid like shit and required her to eat greasy fries and slop burgers for lunch every day. She did this because she wasn't allowed to clock out during her lunch break, she needed to stay there and be on the clock. Sometimes she'd sip her milkshake, walking around, sweeping, and that would be lunch. She hadn't seen her sisters since Sharice got out, and she hadn't seen them before then since Sharice's hearing. She was there with Mikey.

They got there and Jenine was asleep. She was 2 days into her detox. Cyr hadn't visited, Ariel said, "he's only around when she can give it up easy."

Detoxing off of opioids is a nasty business, the throes of which Jenine was trapped in for the time being. Jenine was a near pro at the emergency room detox by this point, she had after all been using since she was 16. A quarter of her life, almost, considering she was going to be 24 in February. She sat there on her bedpan making lasagna sauce and sleeping, that was the best thing to do.

Ariel's quiet stare cut into Joyce as she sat there, her sister to her left and Mikey to her right. She was going to leave in 15 minutes, that was the plan, but that didn't seem like such a good idea anymore. Visiting hours went on for another 45 minutes, and Jenine wasn't awake. What if she didn't wake up in 15 minutes? What if it was all just a waste of time? What if it's her fault that Jenine relapsed? Maybe she should've gone to school and stayed at home and she could've seen Jenine more often and talked to her and helped her understand her problems. Maybe she could've been there when Sharice shot Bobby, when they shot Sharon. She would be more connected to her family, to her legacy. The people who brought her up, the people who she owed her life and her brains and her personality to. Maybe she should be a better person, maybe she should just take everything she's built up of herself in the past 10 months and give it up and beg to move back in and enroll for the spring and be good the way that her mom taught her, the

way that she was supposed to be, the way she has always been. Why is she changing everything in her life? Why is she shaking everything up? Why is she forcing everything to change? What's wrong with her?

Jenine mumbled something about water, and Joyce snapped to. She got Jenine's cup, held the straw to her lips, and let her drink. Mikey moved closer. "How're you doing, Jen?" he asked.

She swallowed, "Better than your crippled ass, Mike," she said, and then coughed and laughed.

"Fuck off," Mikey said.

"I'm sorry that was mean," Jenine said, "You know, I'm just tired and pissed off."

"Whatever Jen, you've always been a bitch."

"I love you Mikey, you've always put up with my junky ass."

"Yeah," he chuckled out, "not much else to do with it."

Jenine smiled.

"You getting taken care of and all that?" Joyce asked.

"Mama watches like a hawk, like she always does."

"Whatever Jenine," Ariel said, sitting with her arms crossed in the corner.

"You still love me even though I'm a junkie mama, you gotta admit that," Jenine said. "I feel sick."

"Because you're detoxing," Mikey said.

"I'm taking bets how long I'm clean this time," Jenine chortled, "you wanna take me up."

"How long were you using?" Joyce asked.

"Just a little while, just a couple months, not that long. I'm just a bit off is all. After Sharon and Sharice and all that."

Joyce felt that pit in her stomach that she always feels when she hears Jenine talk about her using. It was just about the same story on Joyce's part, she had been back on adderall since

the incident. But it made her a better worker, and it helped her get the things done that she wanted. She didn't see it as a problem.

Sharon was feeling her wound. She was tired, the night was seeping into day and the sky was an imperial violet with the reflection of the city lights. The wound had been closed and she was grateful that it wasn't a very dark scar, it mixed in alright with the surrounding skin. She was lucky to have been shot in an easier spot to repair.

There was a knock on her door. The walls were all painted the same black, but the door was still its white color, the same one that it had when it was bought from the hardware store. She got up and went to the door. When she got close, she heard, "It's Sharice." She opened the door.

"Hey, how're you doing," Sharon said, her face blank and her heart pounding.

Sharice was sniffling. "Do you wanna go up to the roof? I have a joint." Her shoulders were slouched, her hair ragged and she couldn't manage to make eye contact with her sister.

"Yeah, sure, of course," Sharon said. She could tell what was wrong, she needed to be there for her.

They climbed out through Sharon's window, there was a ledge that was rather low that lead to the top roof and if you got up there you could climb around the other side. It faced away from the city, so you could see some stars. They lied down next to each other, Sharon stumbled a bit and they giggled about it. Sharice lit the joint and passed it to Sharon.

"Where'd you get this from?" Sharon asked.

"I stole it from mom, she has a half pound bag in her closet, I just took like a half she shouldn't notice."

"She's smoking again?"

"Yeah, she's been smoking for a while I bet. I think there was a full pound when she got it."

“Jeez, she wasn’t smoking for a while. She must’ve started up when that shit went down.”

Sharice stopped up. She looked up at the stars.

“I just hope that she’s not gonna get back into horse,” Sharon said.

“It’s all my fault,” Sharice blurted out.

“What?”

“It’s my fucking fault. I’m so fucking stupid. I just *shot* someone. I had never even shot a gun before. And what if the kids at school are right? What if I shot you too?” Sharice started crying and said, “I’m so fucking dumb. I’m fucking broken and I’ve ruined everything.”

“Sharice it’s okay.”

“No, no it’s fucking not okay,” Sharice yelled, “I’m fucking stupid and fucked up and I can’t make friends as hard as I try and no one ever wants to stick around and everything about me is fucked. I’m a 13 year old ex-con druggie. I’m fucked.”

“Sharice…”

“I SHOT HIM! I COULD HAVE KILLED HIM.”

“He was attacking us.”

“I COULD HAVE BEEN A MURDERER.”

“You were just defending us. It’s ok.”

“No. No, no, no, no, no, no. You’re not hearing me. I’m a fucking monster. I shouldn’t fucking be here anymore. I should’ve been punished by god or something.”

“Sharice, I promise…”

“No,” Sharice said, and stood up. She started pacing near the edge of the roof.

“Sharice, sit down, you’re gonna get hurt.”

“I should get hurt,” Sharice said. Sharon got up then, she put the joint in her mouth. She was puffing and blowing out the other end of her lips.

“It’s gonna be ok, you’ll see, it’s not true, you’re not a monster.”

“No, no, you don’t fucking get it. I’m the reason everyone is relapsing, I’m the reason Jenine is in the hospital, next mom’s gonna be on heroin again and that’ll be my fault too. I can’t handle being the reason everything is fucked.”

“You’re not! It wasn’t your fault. Please, come back, just sit down and we’ll talk.”

“No, stop telling me what to do. You don’t know what’s best for me. I do. I know that this is right. I need to not be here. It will make things better. I need to be dead.”

“Sharice, please come back over here.”

“No.”

Sharon stopped. Sharice was looking down off the roof of the house. The back yard had a large cement patio that she was envisioning clashing against her skull. Sharon just looked at her for a minute.

“You remember when we’d sit backseat, go to barn dances, have a good time? Remember last year, or the year before, when Jenine got that big crush on Cyr, and you were telling me about how you wouldn’t mind being with a man that looked like him? And you said ‘I wonder if he’s got a little brother’ and then we found out he did.”

Sharice was thinking about how she used to feel. She thought about how excited she was to see that boy at the bonfire, how much she wanted to talk to him.

Sharon grabbed her sisters hand and put the joint in it. “Come relax for a bit, take your mind off it.”

Sharice took a step back, she lied flat on her back and looked up at the stars. She inhaled deeply and exhaled. “The stars look brighter than normal,” she said, “that one looks green.”

And Sharon looked up and there was a green star in the sky. She felt a gust of wind wash over her, warm and inviting, smelling of rosemary.